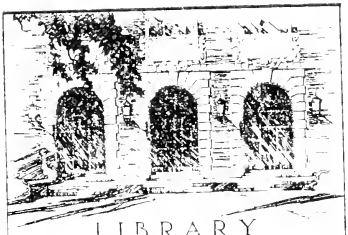

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A SYLVAN QUEEN.

VOL. I

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A SYLVAN QUEEN

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"RACHEL'S SECRET,"

&c., &c.

"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds he all."
From the "Sinngedichte" of FRIEDRICH VON LOGAN. 1650.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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A SYLVAN QUEEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE WANDERER.

NIGHT was falling over Marholm Moor. Twilight long since had deepened into dusk. The young moon with the old one in her arms had dropped, weary with her burden, behind the dark ridge of the western hills, and, one by one, the stars were trembling forth from rifts in the cloud rack that drifted black and ragged across the sky. A finger-post, with three misshapen arms flung out in as many directions, uprose starkly at a point where the road that wound over the northern shoulder of the moor branched off suddenly to right and left. Besides this, and the figure of a man who stood beneath

it, striving with knit brows to decipher the half effaced inscription, nothing, save here and there a clump of gorse or a stunted fir, broke the outlines of the billowing expanse of heath which on every side stretched as far as the traveller's eye could reach.

Belated and astray! For in vain he endeavoured to spell out through the gloom the stained and mildewed lettering. Ten miles, at least, to judge by his watch, he must have walked since he left the roadside station which was the nearest point by rail to the village for which he was bound. Ten miles—and the station-master had assured him that less than a couple of hours would take him across the moor to the edge of Marholm Chase, skirting which was a road leading into the village itself. Some signs of human habitation, the smoke of cottage chimneys, or at least the dark tops of the trees in the Chase, he ought to have fallen in with by this; unless, as he began uneasily to suspect, he had somewhere or other taken a wrong track, and been wandering with every step only further and yet further astray.

He gave a low prolonged whistle of half dis-

mayed perplexity, as he looked this way and that along the roads to which the sign-post dumbly pointed, and then around him again into the gloom, vainly hoping to descry something that might serve to direct his course. But nothing was to be seen except the vast shadowy reach of moor; dark, sombre, silent, in the deepening night; no sound to be heard save the gurgle of a hidden runlet, and the shriek of the wind through the heather as it came tearing up the hollows. If he had had so much as a crust of bread in his pocket, or a drop of Glenlivat remaining in his flask, he would have sought out some sheltered hollow near at hand, and there, with the sky for his canopy and his leathern travelling case for a pillow, have stretched himself on the dry elastic heath, and made shift to sleep beneath the stars. It would not have been the first time, had he done so, that they had kept watch over his slumbers. In Swiss *châlets*, where from his couch the broken roof had given him an outlook on the heavens, in Venetian gondolas, in green passes of the Pyrenees, in the grim solitudes of Bohemian pine forests, many a time he had slept beneath

their light. For art brings her followers into strange straits sometimes, and Hugh Beverley had known before this what it was to suffer hardship for her sake.

He felt even now an artist's enjoyment in the weird and solemn majesty of the hour. He could willingly have stayed till midnight, steeping himself in the spirit of the scene, but unfortunately the keen moorland breeze which he drew in with every breath had sharpened other senses than those which responded to this mystery and immensity of nature. He was not weary. The wild free air was as a tide of rushing life around him; but he was hungry, desperately and prosaically hungry, and internal monitions, not to be ignored, warned him that just now a well-spread supper-table, nay, a loaf of dry bread itself, though it cost him another ten miles' tramp to find it, would be worth all the gloomy grandeurs of the nocturnal landscape.

A moment he paused, scanning doubtfully the diverging roads; then he struck at hazard into that turning off to the right. It led him up a rugged steep acclivity, too steep to have been climbed willingly at the end of a long

day's journey, but for the hope that when once the crest of the hill was reached some ruddy gleam might be descried, twinkling in the valley below, telling where the light shone through a cottage window, and where food and shelter, or at the least where guidance, might be had.

He shifted his valise from one shoulder to the other and strode along, his face to the wind, his feet planting themselves firmly on the ground; with a certain easy lordship, too, in his gait, as of one well used to ruling either others or himself. You might have thought that at every step this travel-stained pedestrian was taking possession of the soil on which he trod; taking it against terrible odds of opposition, too, for, as he ascended, the road became continually more steep and rough. Now he struck his foot against a clump of heath, then half stumbled into a hole which had been concealed by some overhanging bank. And still, as he toiled upward, the hill seemed to heave itself the higher, while with every moment the darkness gathered thicker, and the wind, rising into more furious gusts as he left the sheltered hollows, swept against him as if it would defy him to proceed.

Still he strode on, right in its teeth. The very fierceness of the blast roused in him a feeling of resistance to its viewless force. Just so he had fought his way through life; fighting often in the dark, beaten back by difficulties, thrust down, resisting, conquering at last. In great things as in small, he had been used long to measure the sweetness of the victory by the sharpness of the strife. And if in all the world he had won to himself nothing more precious than that towards which he was pressing now, food, shelter, rest, a home in an inn, and work for that cunning right hand of his, yet if with these he was content, what richer having need be his?

The wind drove down more pitilessly against him. He was close on the crest of the hill now, where there was nothing to break its force. One blast, wilder than the rest, half took him from his feet. He stood for an instant, wrestling as with an unseen foe; then again set his face forward, to be aware now of a dark shadow moving towards him through the gloom. It came nearer. He hallooed, and a voice replied. A few steps further, and he saw dimly a stalwart figure coming to

a halt beside him. A gamekeeper, as he judged by his dress, and by the gun upon his shoulder. A guide, at all events; better, it was to be hoped, than that dumb post upon the heath.

He had gone wrong; that he learned for certain. Marholm, from this point of the moor, was five miles distant by the road. Two, if he went through the Chase; but then no stranger could track his way there in the dark; besides, the gates at the other end likely enough were locked.

A gruff deep voice, but it rang like that of an honest man. The artist knew it. He had been accustomed, as he went through life, to judge men by other tests than those which society is wont to apply.

"If you live anywhere hereabout," he said, "I would make it worth your while to give me a supper and a bed. This moorland air has made me ravenous, and five miles is too far to go fasting at this time of night."

The keeper rubbed his hand across his brow. "Why, as to that, sir," he replied, "you are welcome to a supper, such as we have to give you; but I doubt we couldn't so easy provide

you with a bed. I would sooner take the key and let you through the Chase myself to the Marholm gate. It isn't over a stone's throw from there to the inn."

"As you like," returned Hugh, too heartily glad of the near prospect of a supper to care much for anything beyond. "Which is our way?"

"This," said the man, curtly; and, facing about, he pointed down from the brow of the hill to where Hugh saw clearly enough a ruddy light shining in the valley below, from amid a dark environment of trees.

"You had best keep nigh hand of me, sir," said the keeper, when they had been plunging for half a mile or so through heath and fern, he leading the way, and his companion following as best he might along the tangled and rocky path. "You had best keep nigh hand of me. It is an ugly piece of road along by these here quarry pits, and the ling and broom grows over the sides of them, while you might as easy as not set your foot on a bit of loose bank, and find yourself the next minute at the bottom with a broken back. This way, sir. You'll be all right if you keep nigh hand of me."

It was a timely caution. The artist drew aside with an involuntary shudder as he saw through the gloom a gulf of darkness yawning on the right, not more than a yard or two from his feet, and unpleasantly suggestive of a headlong fall and mangled limbs.

"It is a dangerous-looking place," he said. "The owners ought not to leave it exposed in this way, so near a public path."

"It might be dangerous to them that didn't know of it," returned the keeper; "but there's none comes this way of a night but what does. I never heard tell of aught happening at the old quarry pits, without it was now and again a sheep or a lamb might fall over."

"They ought to be protected, nevertheless," said Hugh. "It does not follow that an accident never will happen because only sheep or lambs have been killed as yet."

"You say true, sir," replied the man, with a rasping bitterness in his tone, "and I don't doubt but what he would put up a bit of a railing, would the Squire, if they was his own sheep that he run on the moor. But he's a hard man, is Squire Elphinstone. He don't lay

a penny on the ground without he sees a chance of its growing him another."

"Then these moors belong to him?"

"This part of them does, sir. That road that you was on when I came up with you parts between his property and Lord Danvers'. I am one of his lordship's keepers. It is a short cut to my house, is this. Here we are, sir," he added, as they came out the next moment at the foot of the hill, upon a bye-road, open on the one side to the moorland, and on the other fenced off by the low stone-wall which ran beneath the outermost fringe of the trees in Marholm Chase.

The keeper took from his pocket a key, with which he opened a wicket gate in the wall. Hugh followed him a hundred yards or so into the dusky shelter of the wood; then a stream of warm light shone out across the path, and the man stopped before a little brown nest of a cottage, and rapped with his key upon the window whence the comfortable glow had issued.

CHAPTER II.

A COTTAGE INTERIOR.

A YOUNG girl opened the door and came out quickly into the porch.

"Why, whatever has brought you back so soon, father?" she exclaimed, in a tone of surprise; then, seeing a stranger in the rear, she drew back hastily, casting a glance, abashed yet curious, from a pair of dark bright eyes, upon the unexpected visitor.

The keeper stooped his head beneath the low-browed doorway and went into the houseplace, beckoning to his companion to follow him. A dark-visaged, powerful-looking man, as Hugh saw him in the fuller light, with rough thick hair and beard, and thews and sinews like a son of Anak's; just the sort of man for a gamekeeper where the preserves needed watching, one whom it would be dangerous to meet by night on

a poaching affray. That right arm of his could deal a deadly blow, no doubt, if need were and his blood were up; nor was the weather-beaten face that of a man likely to parley long with a foe. Yet there was a lurking softness in his voice as he spoke to the girl.

"Madge, my lass, can thee give us some supper? Here is a gentleman has lost his way coming over the moor from Stretton station. Look as sharp as thee can, now," he added. "Time's getting on, and we have to Marholm gates to walk after it."

The girl, thus admonished, disappeared through an inner door; and the artist, who was just weary enough after his three hours' tramp to feel the luxury of a rest now that it offered itself, flung himself, nothing loath, on the chintz-covered settle to which the keeper invited him, and stretched out his feet to the warmth upon the hearth.

Seen in the red firelight he appeared to be about thirty years of age, perhaps a little less; broadly built, rather under than over the middle height, with tawny brown hair, and a thick soft beard of just a lighter shade. He had the

full projecting brows that denote the artist faculty, and deep-set eyes, sweet and kindly as a woman's if you looked well into them, but with that keenness of glance which may be noticed in those who are accustomed to exercise their vision much in the open air. He had plunged forward doggedly enough an hour ago up that steep hill-side road, but now that circumstances had changed he seemed to adapt himself with ease to the comfortable contrast, and looked round him with a leisurely ingathering gaze at the snug quarters in which he found himself thus unexpectedly installed.

There was no other light than that of the burning logs, which the keeper shook and stirred with his iron-shod heel into a dancing blaze. A shower of sparks rushed up the wide-throated chimney, and tongues of flame leaping out threw a ruddy glow over the sanded floor and whitewashed walls, and brought out into picturesque relief the cumbrous oaken furnishings and the dark timbers of the roof. Rude enough, though there were no signs of poverty visible; hints even of homely luxury, in the row of hams and flitches of bacon which hung

suspended from the ceiling, in the well-stuffed couch, and in the substantial check curtains which draped the little window. Decorations, too, as if a woman's hand had been at work; for on the settle was a plump cushion wrought of gay bits of cloth, and upon the table in the window stood a bowl filled with brown and crimson sycamore leaves, with fronds of young fern and clusters of drooping lilies, whose perfume the quick sense of the artist detected above the heavier odour of the burning wood.

The girl has an eye for colour, he said to himself, as he took in at a glance these little touches of adornment; and he looked round, not incuriously, when presently she re-appeared, and began to make preparations for supper.

He saw a dark-eyed, gipsy-looking girl, straight as a young sapling and as strong, with a rich warm flush upon her tanned cheeks, and hair as black as a raven's wing rippling over her forehead, and fastened in a loose knot at the back of her head. She wore a coarse blue linsey gown, short enough to show a shapely foot and well-turned ankle, and fitting to a bust moulded like that of some Greek sculptor's masterpiece.

Beauty of form and colour too, of young abundant life were here; a perfect study for a rustic belle, looking at her from an artist's point of view, and all the more so because nothing about her, from the stout leathern shoes that cased her feet, up to the bit of bright ribbon that tied her hair, was out of keeping with her rude abode or homely occupation. Hugh watched her with a sense of critical content, as she moved to and fro, spreading the cloth on the round table which she had drawn forward to the hearth, setting forth the loaf of home-made bread, the blue delf platters, the horn-handled knives and forks, and from time to time going to the fire to turn the slices of ham that were frizzling and spluttering in a pan which she had fixed on a kind of trivet over the heated brands.

She went about her task deftly enough, with a half coquettish air, as if quite conscious that the stranger's eye was on her. Doubtless the young gipsy knew as well as he how admirably the ruddy fireshine brought out the warm tinting of her cheek, and that nothing could have been better adapted to show off the dimples in her rounded arms than the various

turns and manipulations which her cookery required. More than once the artist caught a stray glance stealing round to him from under her long dark lashes; though, if she found herself observed, she would give a little toss of her head, and move away with apparent unconcern, leaving the rashers for a while to frizz and splutter by themselves.

These feminine wiles, however, did not interfere with her preparations for supper. In ten minutes' time, the rashers were smoking on the table, flanked on one side by a tankard of foaming ale, and on the other by a dish containing a goodly pile of plovers' eggs. Everything was delicately clean and nice. The keeper's daughter had notions, apparently, somewhat daintier than were common in her rank of life; an evident pride, too, in letting the stranger see that she possessed the wherewithal for setting her table duly forth. The damask table-cloth which she had taken from a locked press at the other end of the room was white as snow, and sweet with the lavender in which it had lain; and if the crockery bore marks of service in various chips and scratches not comprehended in the original

design, and if the cutlery suggested doubts as to whether the two-pronged forks had been intended for agricultural or for gastronomic implements, still everything was as free from speck or stain as good housewifery could make it.

"Now, sir," said the keeper, with gruff civility, when Madge had placed a chair for their guest. "Now, sir, make free with what there is. It isn't much of a supper for a gentleman like you, isn't eggs and bacon, but you are welcome to it, heartily; and it is better, anyhow, than going fasting to Marholm at this time of night."

"Surely!" said Hugh, who needed no second invitation to "make free" with what was set before him. "But a supper like this needs no excuse. Plovers' eggs, too, and such plenty of them! Why, Epicurus himself could not have wished for better fare."

"He is a gentleman I never heard tell of," said the keeper; "but if you are fond of plovers' eggs I am glad we have some left for you. They're latish this season, or there wouldn't have been any at all. I can't say as I am partial to them myself, but some folks like them.

Our Madge would have them all the year round if they were to be had."

"It shows that she possesses aristocratic tastes as well as culinary skill," said Hugh, with an approving smile, helping himself at the same time abundantly from the dish before him.

The girl laughed a pleased reply. She was not altogether sure what culinary skill might mean, but she had a fine ear for flattery, and she understood as well that the gentleman was paying her a compliment, as if he had expressed himself in the homeliest vernacular.

"Oh, sir," she said, "it isn't that I would not have done a chicken gladly, and there is sparrowgrass plenty in the garden, but just the ham and eggs were handy."

"And delicious, too," said Hugh. "You have given me the most sumptuous supper possible. It is fit for a prince."

"It's the *sass* that does it," put in the keeper. "That's what it is, sir. I reckon you don't get moorland air to your victuals every day. It's a first-rate sass is moorland air to make a man relish his meat. You won't mind my having a pipe, sir," he added, "while you are agate of

your supper? It sort of axes for a pipe does this here chair of mine when I get set down in it of a night."

"Not in the least. Have one by all means," said Hugh. "I shall feel the more at leisure to attend properly to the plovers' eggs. if I see you employed while I keep you waiting."

"That's your way of putting it, sir," returned the keeper, as he reached his arm down behind his chair and brought up a long and not over clean pipe, which he proceeded to fill, lighting it with a brand from the hearth. "There's a deal in the way of putting things; but it is strongish bacca is this, and gentlemen doesn't always fancy the common sort, without they are smoking themselves as well. There is the young squire, now; he has been down here two or three times since he come home, and he can't abide it. But he is particular is Mr. Pelham. He might be a woman he is that particular in some of his ways. Madge, my lass, fill me a mug of ale."

Madge tossed her head, whether at the allusion to the ways of women in general, or to those of the young squire in particular, did not appear;

but she filled her father's mug without a word, and then seated herself on a three-legged stool on the other side of the hearth. Not out of sight of the stranger, though; for, whether by accident or design, she placed herself just where the red firelight falling upon her showed her gipsy-looking profile and lithe round figure to the best advantage.

"You are keeper to Lord Danvers, I think you said?" began Hugh presently, addressing his host.

"And has been, sir, these twenty years, to him and his father before him. There is fine shooting here at Marholm. His lordship used to live here regular while this last year or two, but my lady took to being delicate, and they have gone abroad now for her health. It is warmer, they say, in them foreign parts than what it is here."

"And Marholm, I suppose, belongs to him?"

"Well, the most part of it does, sir. But what they call the Low Flats is owned by Squire Elphinstone, and the west side of Marholm Chase likewise. It is a handsome estate is the Squire's. Him and Lord Danvers between them

owns all the land hereabout. But he is a queer man, is the Squire; a queer man and a hard."

The keeper checked himself abruptly, put his pipe into his mouth again, and puffed away in silence; fierce, steady whiffs, as if some hidden scorn would find safer vent in this way than in speech. His guest troubled him, however, with no further inquiries, but addressed himself with renewed diligence to the ham and plovers' eggs. It was a matter of indifference to him whether the name of Squire Elphinstone were held in good or evil odour by the Marholm folk. He was not likely himself to have any dealings with the man, unless indeed, like Lord Danvers, he should chance to give him a commission for a picture, which of course was a not impossible contingency.

"You'll be a stranger in these parts, sir, I reckon?" resumed the keeper presently, giving, as he spoke, a thrust at the burning logs, which lit up with a sudden glow his dark determined face.

"I am," returned the artist. And being willing to return courtesy for confidence—for gentle or simple, these people were his hosts, and he

for the time their guest—he explained that he had come down to Marholm to paint a picture for Lord Danvers; a glade in the Chase, where, so he was told, there was some of the finest woodland scenery in the country.

"And they say true, sir," said the keeper, finding himself on safe ground again. "There's never no oaks nor beeches as ever I've seen that are to mention with some of ours in Marholm Chase. There is one now betwixt this and the Court; three men wouldn't gird it. And a clump of beeches there is just by the Mill Dyke End, and the branches of everyone of them is the size of a tree. Here is our Madge has said often what a picture them beeches was when they was turning in autumn time."

Madge, thus brought into the conversation, ruffled up with a look of pretty consciousness, and gave a side-glance towards their guest, who, the young gipsy knew, had more than once cast his eyes in her direction.

"The gentleman won't need to go as far as the Mill Dyke End for a picture," she said. "There are plenty nearer hand than that."

"I have no doubt there are," said the artist.

And, whether he intended it for her or not, Madge caught a glance which she interpreted to mean that he had found already close at hand what might serve quite well for one.

Perhaps her vanity had been quicker to detect than the artist to conceal his admiration; for, genial and even easy as he was in his ways, Hugh Beverley was not quite the man, judging from his face, to bandy glances with a peasant girl. But certainly the thought had struck him, as he looked up just then, that he had never seen a better subject for his pencil. It was worth the tramp across the moor to have fallen in with it. Indeed, if he had not had other work laid out for the next few months, he would have liked nothing better than to have wrought up this study of "A Cottage Interior," with all its picturesque effects of light and shade, its wide-throated chimney, its glowing hearth, its smoke-darkened timbers and rude plenishings, his grim host in the background, and this rustic beauty for the central figure.

Before the keeper's pipe was quite smoked out Hugh had finished his supper. He would willingly have stayed another hour, luxuriating in the

lazy warmth upon the hearth, but the eight-day clock in the corner, with ten inexorable strokes, gave warning that it was time to rise and go. The keeper knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stood up, while Madge, with smiles and blushes, received her meed of thanks for her share in the evening's entertainment. As to proposing payment for their hospitality, that would have been an affront which Hugh was too much a gentleman in grain to think of offering. The service done him was one to be paid in kind, and not in coin. He shook hands, however, with his gipsy-looking hostess; there was nothing derogatory to either her dignity or his own in that; and he lifted his hat to her as he turned from the cottage door, where she stood watching them away, in a flutter of pleasure and surprise at the unaccustomed honour.

Possibly, had Madge been some stubby damsel, with freckled face and clumsy figure, our artist might have acknowledged her services in a less familiar fashion. But the girl's beauty seemed in some sort to do for her what genius, in his own case, had done for him. It lifted her out of her lowly surroundings to set her on a

level with those higher than herself. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to treat her with a certain courtesy of manner, quite distinct from condescension. He did so instinctively, hardly thinking of it; and then, without glancing back, strode after the keeper, who guided him through the dusky penetralia of the woodland ways, as far as the gate which opened out at the other end of the Chase upon the village green at Marholm.

A square of glowing light beyond the great beech-tree on the centre of the green, marked the window of the Marholm inn; and there Hugh found a home, and such traveller's welcome as he needed, from good Mistress Boynton; who, inferring from his dress and accent that he belonged to the "quality," speedily made ready the best room in her house, and herself escorted him to the door, descanting by the way on the excellence of her accommodation, and assuring him that nothing would be wanting on her part for his comfort so long as he should find it convenient to remain.

But the best bed at the "Danvers Arms" might have been a patch of brown heath or a truss

of straw for anything our traveller cared. He flung himself down upon it just as the clock in Marholm church tower was on the stroke of eleven, and by the time the chiming ceased he was asleep.

CHAPTER III.

THE LANDLADY'S TALE.

A STIRRING woman was Mistress Boynton, of the "Danvers Arms;" a buxom, capable, rosy-visaged widow, of some forty years or thereabouts. Mistress Boynton was always hazy on the subject of her age, and it would ill become us on so delicate a point to be more explicit than she was herself. She had been mistress of the "Danvers Arms" for the last fifteen years, sole mistress ever since old Luke Boynton, her second husband, departed this life some seven years ago, leaving his spouse to rule the roost alone. And rule it she did, to some purpose too; for, as she was fond of inquiring, putting the question strongly—

"Where will you find a public this side of St. Bede's that's better carried on than what the 'Danvers Arms' is? or one that is cleaner and

comfortabler, and the liquors of the best, and charges moderate, and the custom respectable, and never no racketing of a night, and rent and taxes paid reglar, and everything as it ought to be in a well-conducted house?"

She had been stirring for three hours and more, busy with her tongue and eye and hand, when Hugh came downstairs the next morning, and guided by the fragrance of broiled kidney and coffee, which a cherry-cheeked damsel had just carried in, made his way into the "blue parlour," where he found breakfast waiting for him, and the morning sun shining merrily in through a vine-clad window, the panes of which were liberally scratched over with the names of previous occupants of the room.

Perhaps, having, as she expressed it, broken the neck of the day's work by the time that her guest had concluded his repast, Mistress Boynton felt that she might legitimately devote a few moments to conversation when she came in, as her custom was, after breakfast was taken out, to receive her orders for the day.

She was too politic, however, to give any definite reply to the inquiry which Hugh presently

made as to the possibility of obtaining decent lodgings in the village.

There was no one she knew of that she could recommend satisfactory for a gentleman like Mr. Beverley, without it was Mrs. Midgely at the post-office, and she had Mr. Crawford, the doctor's assistant, lodging with her constant. There might be an odd farmhouse near at hand where they would not object to a lodger. She couldn't say; but the farmers' wives were mostly throng enough as it was, without anything extry that way to the work.

"But, if I might make free to advise, sir," pursued the dame, "I should say you couldn't do better than stop where you was. I had a gentleman here last summer, came for his health —it's reckoned an uncommon healthy place, is Marholm—and he stopped on with me better than two months, he was so well satisfied. And real quality he was, too; as I should say, begging your pardon, you was yourself, sir. And as far as being well cooked for, and done for in a general way, and made comfortable as a gentleman had ought to be made comfortable, I don't think you could better yourself anywhere

hereabouts, and that is the honest truth. For how things had ought to be done, and what belongs to quality, there's none knows better than me, that was cook five year at the Court, before I married my first and come to the 'Danvers Arms;' and going for fifteen year I've been mistress here, wife and widow, as I am now; and satisfaction I've always given, as you may judge when I tell you that I have had the same parties come here to the shooting as many as seven year running, and never a word but what was pleasant between us. And airier rooms there needn't be than this and the blue chamber, and the morning sun, and the bed well aired, and everything clean and sweet; as there isn't a floor in the house, I'm happy to say, but what you might eat off it if you was so disposed. And charges most moderate, for, if there is one thing more than another that I can't abide, it is to have a party complain about the bill."

And, having put this judicious climax to her speech, Mrs. Boynton dropped suddenly from the eulogistic and rhetorical to a more directly

practical tone, and inquired what Mr. Beverley would please to have for dinner.

A question which Hugh soon settled; and then he rose from the table and walked to the window, expecting that the landlady would take herself away.

But the dame was minded to improve the opportunity a little further.

"You will like this room, I don't doubt, sir," she said, casting a complacent glance around the snug, old-fashioned parlour. "Gentlemen mostly think it uncommonly cheerful; and the view down the village, and everything seen that is going on, and the church quite an object of attraction, as Mr. Skelmerdale used to say. It is a beautiful church; what they call a specimen of Norman architecter; and there is the parsonage chimneys you see above that there clump of red chestnut-trees."

"Ah, Canon Daylmer! Is not that the rector's name?" said Hugh, a little bored with his landlady's irrepressible loquacity, but willing, nevertheless, to humour her in her evident desire to be communicative. It was a point on

which he had no need for information, seeing that he had at that moment, in the side-pocket of his coat, a letter of introduction for the Canon from Lord Danvers. But his was a genial soul; the rough handling of the world had not destroyed in him those minor charities of life which are even harder, perhaps, to practise than the high-sounding virtues on which some men pride themselves.

Mrs. Boynton drew herself up briskly.

"Yes, sir; that is the name; Canon Daylmer. Thirty years he has been rector here, and a deal thought of he is in these parts; and so is Miss Daylmer, his sister, that has kept his house ever since Mrs. Daylmer, poor lady, died. And Miss Marjory, too. That is his niece that lives with him. A pleasant-spoken young lady as ever was, and real quality, too, for her father was own brother to the squire; not as it is any credit to anyone to be kin to the squire, but still quality is quality, as I always say, whether it be good or bad."

The squire again! What was this man, thought Hugh, that he should be held in such evil odour by the Marholm folk? But the name

had scarcely passed the landlady's lips, when a sound of horses' hoofs was heard round the corner of the village street, and the next moment a small elderly gentleman, in a snuff-brown coat and mounted on a stout grey cob, came trotting into sight.

There was nothing remarkable in his appearance, unless it might be a certain look of mingled craft and hardness meeting on his face, which impressed the artist with an involuntary feeling of aversion and distrust. Something, too, there was about it which at the first glance struck him with a sense of familiarity, as if at some time he had seen those features before, though where or when he could not at the moment call to mind.

Mrs. Boynton, however, settled the question for him. The rider of the grey cob was no one with whom he had any previous acquaintance, except by report.

"Well, to be sure, now!" she exclaimed; "they do say, 'Talk of Somebody,' for it isn't manners to give him his name, 'and he is sure to appear.' If yon isn't the Squire himself going down the town! It isn't often he shows his

face in Marholm; though, for the matter of that, there's none need wish to see him oftener. But, bless me!" she added in an altered tone, as the old gentleman passed the window at which Hugh was standing, "what a start he did give, to be sure, when he turned his head just now! One would think he had seen a ghost, he looked that scared. Not as anybody need take you for a ghost, sir; for a more likely-looking gentleman I haven't seen since I had the 'Danvers Arms.' But I am sure, sir, if the squire is anything in any shape or way to you, I ask pardon for saying aught against him. It is a way my tongue has of letting things slip; though, to speak truth, it is nothing but what everybody else in this place thinks of him, whether they say it or not. I haven't given offence, sir, I hope," she continued, with a qualm of misgiving apparently, at finding her apologies received in silence.

"Not at all, Mrs. Boynton—not at all," said Hugh, absently. He, too, had observed the old gentleman's sudden start as for an instant their eyes had met, and was gazing now after the snuff-coloured figure which the grey cob was

bearing steadily along. "I have never seen Mr. Elphinstone before to-day, that I am aware of."

"And needn't wish to again, I'm sure, sir," responded the dame, in a tone of relief. "There are plenty in these parts would be thankful never to set eyes on him more. Though I am not the woman, and never was, to wish a man in his grave before his time; and tried I was past mortal patience, as anyone will bear me witness, before my first was took. You wouldn't say, now," she went on, after a moment's pause—"You wouldn't say, by the look of the Squire, that him and his lordship owned all Marholm, and the land about it, between them. But I always say he is that mean and griping in his ways, while his body has shrivelled up to match his soul. They do say, though, and I will give him his due, that he wasn't that way when he was a young man. It was all along of poor Miss Edith giving him the slip, and he has been sort of twisted ever since. I recklect as well as can be, though I was a girl in pinafores when it happened, what a talk it made in Marholm when she went off, the very night

before she was to have been wed to him. There's a tale there to tell! I always say, if I had gifts I could very near make a book of it. But losh, sir! what is Marholm talk to you?"

"Go on, Mrs. Boynton, go on," said Hugh, who was still watching from the window the retreating figure, and vainly trying to connect the old gentleman's startled glance and apparent recognition, with the fancied familiarity by which he had himself been struck. The missing links refused to be found; still the momentary rencounter had given him an odd sort of interest in the history which the good woman was evidently anxious to relate.

"And how came the young lady to behave so ill to him?" he inquired.

"Why, sir," returned Mrs. Boynton, "as to her behaving ill, I wouldn't say that Miss Edith did that; but, you see, she was his cousin, and it was her father, Mr. Geoffry Elphinstone, that owned the estate then, and sore vexed he was that he hadn't a son to heir it after him, and keep the name and the property together. So him and his brother, this squire's father, they put their heads together, and settled it between

them that Miss Edith should marry her cousin Mark, and the property keep in the family, and belong to an Elphinstone, same as it had always done. But, however, sir," continued Mrs. Boynton, "Miss Edith didn't fancy her cousin, and one winter she was away with her father at a place where there were some waters that he went to drink for his gout, and there she fell in with a young gentleman, a captain in the army, and, when old Mr. Elphinstone found it out, he brought her back right away, without ever waiting to have his gout cured. Leastways, there was as much as that got out in the village, for folks can't keep things so quiet but what some sort of a whisper gets about. And, after that, the old gentleman was more set than ever on her marrying her cousin, and at last there was talk that it was to be. But, however, it is a toughish thing, is love; and they do say, for as sharp as the old man looked after her, that she and the other young gentleman found ways and means to meet, even after it was fixed for her to marry her cousin. It was in May the wedding was to be, and she had been away on a visit in London, getting the bride's dress and

things, and then, when she got home, what does she do but fall ill of a fever that was stirring in Marholm? Her maid that had been with her had it too, and died of it, and Miss Edith herself was better than two months before she could so much as be drove out in the carriage. And, when she began to mend, I've heard tell that she begged and prayed her father and her cousin, on her bended knees, to let her off the match, and they neither of them would. And the wedding things were made, and the day was fixed, and the bridesmaids were at the Priory, and the arches put up and everything, and when the morning came she was a-missing!

"Not as I blame her," added the landlady, warily, "for she was drove to it by her father; but gone she was, and never no word was heard of her while six months after, the very week before her father died, for it had broke his heart, it had, losing her that way. And then a letter came with just a message for him to go to her at a place somewheres in the south, if I remember rightly, where she was lying ill. Well, sir, as you may judge, old Mr. Elphinstone

couldn't go to her when he was lying at death's door himself; so Mr. Mark had to go instead, for there was no one else belonging to the family to send, and five days afterwards he came back. She had died the same night he got there, and he had waited to see her buried. But what sort of a meeting him and Miss Edith had, or where she had been all that six months, or anything about her, no one ever knew. Leastways it was kept so close that it never got out of the family. Deary me! what a talk it made in Marholm! And the next week there was the old squire's funeral; and, instead of poor Miss Edith, there was Mr. Mark to heir the property, and so he came to be squire after all; for his own father had been dead a good bit then. And there's many in Marholm wishes he had been dead too, for then his half brother, Mr. Percival, that was away in India, would have heired it; him that was our Miss Marjory's father. And she is a sweet young lady as ever breathed, is Miss Marjory; like a June rose for beauty and for bloom, and them that know do say she is the very image of what poor Miss Edith used to be."

"And how long is it since all this happened?" inquired Hugh.

"Why, sir," returned the landlady, allowing a cautious latitude to her chronology, "it was when I was a girl in pinafores. It may be about five and twenty years back, as near as I can tell; or it might be a trifle more, for I have a long memory."

"And this Mr. Mark Elphinstone never brought a lady to the Priory?"

"Oh, yes, sir, he did, not so long after he went to it himself. That is to say," said Mrs. Boynton, correcting herself, "he brought a wife; though whether a common quarryman's daughter could be called a lady, I leave you to judge. The quality in these parts never had much to do with her, not while she lived. There was a deal of them sent their cards when she was dead, so I have heard tell from Mrs. Mapperly; that's the housekeeper at the Priory."

"She is dead, then?"

"Yes, sir, she died when their son, Mr. Pelham, was born. They had been living abroad till then, and came home just a week or two before, so as the child should be born at the

Priory House. They had been married four or five years, and no children, and they do say the Squire was set up beyond everything at having a son and heir. It is mostly so with them that has lands. They think nothing of them without they have children of their own to leave them to. However, Mrs. Elphinstone died, poor thing! just a week after the baby was christened, and ever since then the Squire has lived on at the Priory, saving and screwing, and improving the estate, while they say it is worth very near twice as much now as it was when he came into it. A queer, lonesome sort of life, to my thinking; for there is no one scarce ever goes near the place except when Mr. Pelham is at home, and that isn't often, though he is there now, and has been these three weeks.

"But, bless me!" exclaimed the landlady, pulling herself up abruptly, "if yon isn't half after ten striking by the church clock. I had no thoughts of time having gone so fast; and there is the Stretton carrier stopping at the door, and your case and portmanty, sir, it will be that he is lifting out of his cart. He will be asking eighteenpence for bringing of it, I'll be bound, though a

shilling is his proper charge. He always tries to lay it on with quality, does Benson, without he is looked after pretty sharp. I'll just step out, sir, with your leave, and pay him myself. He knows well enough there is no such a thing as imposing on me."

And, without waiting for an answer, Mrs. Boynton bustled away, and in a moment had whipped a shilling out of her capacious pocket, disappointed the rapacious Benson of his prey, and was seeing the portmanteau and case safely into the house, happily unconscious that Mr. Beverley, with a graceless indifference to being imposed upon, had defeated her prompt interference on his behalf by flinging a supplementary shilling to the malcontent carrier out of the window.

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE IN PARADISE.

A PLEASANT, quaint old village was this of Marholm, with its many-gabled parsonage, its three or four substantial farmhouses, and its mossed and thatched and timbered cottages, clustered as if for love and shelter around the grey church tower, beneath whose shadow, for five hundred years or more, one generation after another of the inhabitants had laid them down to their last long sleep. A quiet nook, such as even now may here and there be found in this rail-netted England of ours, where the whiteness of the May blooms is still unsmirched, and the great world's ceaseless roar is heard only from afar.

Eight miles from the little cathedral town of St. Bede's, seven across the heath from Moor Stretton, the nearest railway station, and on

the high-road to nowhere in particular, Marholm had been left by this wide-awake, worrying nineteenth century considerably in the rear of the march of modern progress. It knew nothing of strikes and trades' unions, of reform clubs and debating societies; but it knew its duty to its neighbours, and for the most part did it, too; nor was it wanting in that other duty of reverence and obedience to its betters which in these days has somewhat fallen into disrepute. Something of the old feudal feeling lingered still in Marholm, relic of the days when men had not yet learned to be ashamed of having superiors, but found it as natural a thing to look up, as now it would seem necessary to have some one to look down upon.

The farmers grumbled a little as rent-day came round, and sighed, things not being so good as they used to be, and the loose hands poached a little now and then, and took their punishment submissively, being detected in the same; but, on the whole, the Marholm tenantry were a decent well-disposed set of folks, and took it as an ordinance of providence that some men should be born to pay rents and others

to receive them, some to own the land and others to toil upon it. It was a peaceful, wholesome, contented life that whiled itself away in that mossy old village, a life rocked lovingly on nature's bosom, and thriving thereupon. You might travel far and wide on a long summer's day and not see a prettier sight than met the eye of Hugh Beverley as he stood in the porch of the "Danvers Arms" after his landlady had left him, and took a leisurely view of his new surroundings.

There was a beech-tree in the centre of the green, with a wooden bench round its huge gnarled trunk, on which sat two or three old men, the patriarchs of the village, who had tottered out from the whitewashed cottages hard by to smoke their pipes in company. Beyond, was the ivy-hooded tower of the church; and, close by it, half hidden by the surrounding trees, rose the high-peaked gables and twisted chimneys of the parsonage, a fine old red-brick Elizabethan building, whose brown-tiled roof, lichen-stained into a mellow harmony of russet, gold, and olive, gave just the dash of warm contrasting colour amid the cool freshness of

the foliage, which to Hugh's artistic eye was like the concord of sweet sounds to a musician's ear. On the other side of the green ran the high stone-coped wall of the Chase, with the griffin guarded gates that opened upon the carriage entrance leading to the Court. There were a few rambling old-fashioned houses of the better sort, wherein dwelt the village doctor, Lord Danvers' steward, and one or two ancient ladies of degree. And, scattered about in easy proximity to their betters, were the thatched cottages already mentioned, and the decent dwellings of the more thriving among the homespun population of the place; notably those of Mark Staniland, the wheelwright, and of Mr. Jacob Marple, the Marholm grocer, draper, druggist, and confectioner, whose shop windows, with their miscellaneous assortment of articles good for food and pleasant to the eye, presented an unceasing source of attraction to the small boys of the village, some of whom might usually be seen clustered in twos and threes around them.

It was a glorious morning, full of the zest, and life, and freshness of the spring—a day to be glad and idle in, as Hugh felt himself in the

mood now to be. He lit a cigar, and strolled out round the village, and into the churchyard, the green God's-acre, thick set with turfy knolls and mossed head-stones, among which he lingered long, reading on their open pages the chronicles of those who were sleeping quietly beneath, and finding a hundred picturesque effects in the buttressed walls and ivied battlements, the quaint gurgoyles and crumbling carving of the weather-beaten old sanctuary.

There was a wicket-gate opening from the churchyard into the rectory garden, and another into the Chase, the wall of which formed its western boundary. Hugh went through it. It led into a narrow and unfrequented path, carpeted with moss and primula, and roofed over so thickly with interlacing boughs that hardly a sunbeam could find its way down into the green gloom below. But how delicious, as he wandered on, was that dim mystery of shade! how hushed and fragrant was the air, all thrilled through with the exquisite new life of spring! He might have been transported since yesterday into some fairy realm, so different was this sweet woodland world from that

which he had left behind him in the noisy, dusty London streets.

He went on, bending his steps as the road swerved this way and that, until he was stopped short by a five-barred gate that crossed his path. Instead of opening it and passing through—for he had come into the Chase intending to look round him and consider a little what point of view it might be best to select for the picture that he was about to commence—he leaned down his folded arms upon the topmost rail, and stood looking over it, down the sunlit glade which stretched before him; not thinking at all, quite forgetting what he had meant to do, just filling his eyes and heart with the beauty that surrounded him. A beauty all the more grateful, perhaps, to his thirsty sense, because for the last six weeks or more, ever since his return from Rome, where he had met with Lord Danvers, whose commission he was about to execute, he had been shut up chiefly to the frowsy atmosphere and dull monotony of a sick-room in London lodgings. He had gathered back his strength, it is true, but he had been near shutting his eyes then on all pleasant sights

of this world, and all vexing ones as well. A foul malaria, creeping up from a nest of fever-haunted houses just beyond the square in which he lived, had seized him in its deadly grip, had dragged him from his easel to his bed, had wrestled with him there sorely and long; till having crushed the life well nigh out of him, it had left him at last to struggle up again out of the dark valley as best he might.

Which, however, he had done, being aided thereto by a good constitution, and still more, perhaps, by that energy of hope which the unexpected good fortune of Lord Danvers' recent commission had aroused. For there is no medicine like hope. To the sick man it is the very *Elixir Vitæ*, more potent than all the physician's drugs; and Hugh Beverley drank it in all the more eagerly because he had waited and thirsted for it so long. More than ten years of toil lay behind him, and he was a poor man still; with a name which critics, it is true, were beginning to mention with that approval which might be the precursor of success, but which had not yet gathered fame enough to sell his pictures for much more than had kept him in food and rai-

ment while he was painting them. A common experience, it must be owned; too common, alas! but a hard one, nevertheless.

But that was all over now. Hugh stood with the shadow of it behind him, and the sunlight on his face. His was that easy philosophy which had enabled him to receive with a resolute nonchalance the rebuffs of fortune. None the less, when her mood changed, he felt the thrill of her caressing hand. And now as he leaned on the five-barred gate in Marholm Chase, gazing idly down the green sun-flecked vista, the strong tide of life rushing through his veins again, and quickening every pulse as if in mystic sympathy with that strange glad life of Nature which breathed through all the air around him, there leaped up too within him the energy born of hope, nerving each faculty with a keener impulse for the strain of work, and making the very thought of his summer's toil a joy.

Adam might have felt so, set down in Paradise, with the life all fresh within him, and the world before him to conquer and enjoy. Like

him, too, in this, that he stood in his Paradise alone!

A fresher fragrance in the air, a sense of richer life in the warm gloom around, a vague ruffling of the stillness within him and without. Hugh turned his head, and there behind him stood a brown-locked girl, plainly enough dressed, yet with a touch of richness here and there in her attire, and a half stately grace in the way she carried her head, which told him at a glance that she belonged to what Mrs. Boynton termed "the quality." How long she had been standing there Hugh could not tell, for her footsteps had fallen unheard upon the mossy path; but, by the look of half amused embarrassment that played about her lips, he concluded that she had been waiting for him to remove his unconscious barricade.

"I beg your pardon. I had no idea that I was stopping the way," he said, as he drew back. And, seeing that she wished to pass through, he would have made amends for his remissness by opening the gate himself. But

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the rusty and crooked latch had views of its own on that point, and declined to yield to his persuasions. He tried in vain; it only the more obstinately refused to open.

"Excuse me," said the girl, gently. "If you will allow me, I think I can manage it. This is a very tiresome gate to open if you do not know the secret of the latch."

She bent over it, pushing the hasp a little sideways, and unfastened it at once. Hugh swung back the gate upon its hinges and held it while she went through. He lifted his hat as he closed it again behind her. The girl smiled and bent her head very slightly in acknowledgment of the courtesy; perhaps, too, there might be just the least touch of feminine curiosity in the glance she cast upon the absent-minded stranger; and then the artist leaned down as before with his folded arms upon the rail, and stood looking after her as she went along beneath the trees.

Her moving form hardly disturbed the stillness of the scene. The flowing lines and soft neutral tones of her dress seemed only to add to the pervading feeling of repose, and to blend

with the woodland beauty round her as she passed on through sun and shade, treading so lightly that the daisies in the turf could hardly have felt the pressure of her foot. Hugh watched her until the grey bole of an old oak-tree, projecting across the path, hid her from his sight. There was only the quiet green glade now, with the sunbeams flickering across it, not quite so brightly, it seemed to him, as when a moment before they had stayed themselves in glad surprise to play around that shining head.

He drew himself up, and shook his thoughts free from the tangled threads of reverie that had wound him in their meshes. It was a beautiful face that he had seen, with a slumbering light in the dark tarn-like eyes, and tender lines about the lovely mouth; a face that to look at only for a moment brought a feeling of content and rest, as if the soul of pure womanhood that dwelt within drew all around it into harmony with itself; a face that to look at once might make a man long to see it again, and yet again. And this was just where Hugh's thoughts had lost themselves when he drew himself up with that sudden start.

What was it to him that the girl was fair? Would that help him with what he had in hand, or guide him to the spot in all that leafy wilderness whose sylvan beauty might best serve him to transfer to canvas? He had near three months' work before him if he were to make his picture what he intended it to be, the crown and flower of his artist life; and with such wealth of choice, such infinite exquisite variety of woodland scenery as met him on every hand, it behoved him not to go carelessly about the task of selection.

Having reached which conclusion, Hugh opened the five-barred gate again and went through, intent on the task before him. He walked on and on, up one green glade and down another. Now he stood still before some hoary giant, whose gnarled and knotted boughs stretched themselves out like the timbers of a cathedral roof; now it was a shadowy nook, festooned with briony and bramble, and carpeted with thickest moss, that caught his eager eye; or a sun-flecked glade, or labyrinth of shade, or open space of turfy ground girdled with trees and dotted over with antlered deer.

For hours he wandered on, choosing and rejecting and again selecting; his mind vigorously at work, his keen, artistic eye seeing at a glance each subtle effect of light and shade, each tender mystery of colour, losing nothing of all the wealth of Nature's loveliness that spread itself around him. Till at last he found what he was seeking. Easily, softly, without care or effort of his own, the picture that was to be swam into form before his eyes. He had thrown himself down at the foot of a gnarled and knotted oak, upon a piece of broken ground where two glades met. One ran downwards into a shadowy glen, the other swept upward till it lost itself in a sunlit vista that arched a little space of cloud-dappled sky and purple moorland. The gloom and solitude, the light and loveliness of sylvan scenery were here, and all so cunningly combined that each served but to heighten the impression of the other.

He need go no further now. His work had met him, and was there before him. The sunshine was warm outside his leafy covert, the winds hushed and still. He lay for hours, just

as he had thrown himself down upon the grass, lost to himself, brooding over his future work, arranging and re-arranging, planning and disposing, till by degrees, from all the fair infinitude around him, there rose before his eyes the perfected ideal of the picture which his next three months' labour should be given to produce.

It was far in the afternoon when he roused himself at last; the slant sunbeams were beginning to strike across him from beneath his foliaged canopy, and to touch with mellower light the grey old oak boles that dotted the Chase, and the sea of waving fern that billowed around their feet. He stood up, and took out his watch, half surprised to see by the lengthening shadows how the day was wearing on. It was four o'clock, and he had ordered dinner to be ready for him at the inn by five. He had an hour before him, just time enough to walk back quietly to the village. He thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned his steps homewards, guiding himself by the sun through the intricacies of the wood. He was in no mood to hurry; he was as weary as if he had done

a hard day's work. Through every nerve and muscle he felt a hint of languor. The intensity of thought, while he had lain forging and shaping his idea upon the anvil of his brain, had exhausted him more than his ten miles' stretch the night before across the rugged moorland road. He loitered on, and had just reached the five-barred gate at which he had stood awhile ago, half dreaming as he watched the moving figure passing down the glade, when he heard a sound of hoofs falling softly upon the mossy path, and the yelp of a dog, behind him.

He turned his head, and saw, scarce twenty yards away, a spare, vigorous-looking man, dressed in a grey tweed morning suit, riding at a foot pace towards the gate.

It was Canon Daylmer. Hugh knew that, the moment he saw the noble head, and the keen, clear-cut face, instinct with intellect and power, yet not without a certain air of melancholy in its repose. Photographs now-a-days make men acquainted with one another the world over, and Hugh had seen at Lord Danvers', in Rome, a portrait of the Canon, whose features once

beheld were too noticeable easily to be forgotten.

The rider drew up his horse, as Hugh, pausing for a moment in his walk, held the gate for him to pass through.

"I think," he said, in a measured voice, just touched with that courteous gravity which marked the gentleman of the *ancien régime* rather than of the modern school, "I think I am not mistaken in thanking Mr. Beverley for this little service."

"Nor I," returned the artist, "in supposing that it is Canon Daylmer to whom I have had the pleasure of rendering it."

"Precisely," returned the Canon; and, with a pleasant smile that seemed at once to lift the veil of strangership between them, he reached down over the neck of his horse and gave his hand to Hugh. "I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Beverley. I had heard from our friend, Lord Danvers, that you were likely soon to take up your residence for awhile amongst us at Marholm. Where are you staying? You have not been here long, I presume?"

"Not long," said Hugh. "In fact, I only arrived late last night. I have taken up my quarters for the present at Mrs. Boynton's, at the 'Danvers Arms,' and think of remaining there; at least, I have been advised by her to do so."

"And very good advice, too. You could hardly do better than follow it. She is a worthy woman, on excellent terms with herself, but one of the few whose performance, I believe, is equal to her promise."

"I am glad to hear it," said Hugh, with a sense of inward satisfaction at finding the good lady's testimony on her own behalf thus credibly confirmed. He had been searching meanwhile in his pockets for the letter of introduction with which Lord Danvers had furnished him, and produced it now.

"I have been entrusted with this for you," he added, as he gave it to the Canon; "and also with a few Italian trifles of which Lady Danvers begs your acceptance. She thought they would reach you more safely through my hands than in any other way."

"I am obliged to her and to you," said the

Canon, bowing. "And now, Mr. Beverley, as our paths appear to lie in the same direction, perhaps you will not mind joining me as far as we go together. Then I shall neither detain you, nor have to wait until another opportunity for the pleasure of making your further acquaintance, and hearing something of our friends and their Roman life."

Hugh consented, nothing loath. Beneath the slight film of old-fashioned formality there was a simplicity and directness, a touch of quiet humour too, which irresistibly attracted him to his companion. The Canon too, on his part, with that freemasonry which obtains among honest souls, causing them the world over to see and recognize each other whatever may be the outward garb of circumstance, had perceived at once that in his new acquaintance he had found a man worth cultivating, and was disposed to give him of his best.

He dismounted from his horse, threw the reins over its neck, and the two men walked together for a mile or so through the wood, discoursing as they went, and mutually content with their encounter.

"You will come and dine with us to-morrow?" said the Canon, as they parted at the wicket-gate leading into the rectory garden. "In these remote regions we permit ourselves to waive ceremony occasionally, and to-morrow is the only evening in the week that I shall have at my own disposal."

"I shall be delighted," said Hugh, who began to think that the lines had fallen to him in pleasant places, and that his sojourn in the little village of Marholm promised so far to be an extremely agreeable thing. True, he had wanted the sunset hour to-morrow, and the low slant evening light, to study effects for his picture; but the Canon's look persuaded him; he seemed so cordially desirous to secure his guest. Besides, thought Hugh to himself, it will not do to strain the bow too far to begin with, and a chat with the Canon to-morrow over the wine and walnuts will send me all the fresher to work when the next day comes.

Then the chestnut mare, who had scented her stable in the distance, and did not approve of this prolonged colloquy, walked off by her master's side down the gravelled sweep that

led round to the rectory door, Rouse dashing on in advance, yelping his usual summons; and Hugh, with a comfortable feeling of good-fellowship warming his heart, bent his steps towards the Marholm inn.

There he found that Mrs. Boynton, as the Canon foretold, had made performance keep pace with promise, and had provided an excellent dinner, to which the appetite that he brought in with him enabled him to do justice in a way that established him more firmly than before in his landlady's good graces.

CHAPTER V.

MARHOLM RECTORY.

A PICTURESQUE old house was Marholm Rectory, roomy, quaint, and substantial; full of odd nooks and corners; with a cosy, well-lined sense of comfort about it, an air of warmth and geniality and repose, that had been gathering into it by slow degrees, like the expression on a human face, throughout the thirty years or more during which it had been the abode of its present occupant, Canon Daylmer, rector of Marholm, and one of the canons in the cathedral of St. Bede's. It had been built in the days of good Queen Bess, and its high-pitched roof, crusted over with a tawny growth of brown and golden lichen, its carved gables, its deep bay-windows, its clustered chimneys and arched porch, gave it a pleasant old-world

air, and made you feel somehow as if that must be a sweet and leisurely life that was lived within its walls.

It stood in the midst of a wilderness of shrubbery and lawn and garden, gay in summer with all manner of fragrant old-fashioned English flowers, and in winter sheltered by the huge oaks and beeches of the Chase, and by a thick belt of yews which made a dusky barrier between it and the northern blasts.

Like the house, the garden had the air of being lovingly cared for, and as lovingly let alone. Nature evidently had a good deal of her own sweet way, and tossed out her treasures of spray and bud and blossom with a careless luxuriance that seemed to laugh at the idea of pruning or restraint. And yet what gracious tendance, too, was there! No weedy litter to be seen, nothing straggling or overgrown in all that flowery pleasaunce. Though, indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise where Miss Millicent Daylmer reigned, for there the very fairy of order seemed to preside as well.

Miss Millicent Daylmer (Miss Millicent as she was always called) kept her brother's

house, and had done so for a good many years, ever since the death of his young wife, more than ten years ago now, had left the Canon a solitary and childless man, with his little niece Marjory, who had just been left on his hands, to bring up. People had said that he would marry again, for he was a man of goodly presence, and still in the prime of life; and one or two managing matrons among the county dames had been at some pains, even before the daisies had begun to blossom on the young wife's grave, to decide upon the most suitable successor to the vacant place. But people are mistaken sometimes. Time passed on, and little Marjory grew up from a winning, impetuous child into a graceful, clear-eyed maiden, and still Miss Millicent continued to preside in the rectory household, looked after the comfort of everyone under her sway, from the Canon down to the canary, and in a general way formed a sort of cheery, sunshiny feminine centre, not in the rectory alone, but for the whole parish of Marholm as well.

A woman like Miss Millicent Daylmer always does make herself a centre of influence

and attraction wherever she may be. There was an effluence of good sense and good will radiating from her that seemed to create an atmosphere of comfort around her. It gave to the rectory a delicious fragrance of Home which seemed to greet you the moment you crossed the threshold, an indefinable sense as of some domestic providence, such as only a woman's presence can impart; though it is not all women who, like Miss Millicent, possess the sweet, rare art of diffusing it around them.

Not that she was by any means what would be termed in ordinary parlance a "superior person," or even highly cultured, in the modern sense of the word. Indeed, had it not been that one of her brother's pet aversions was the use of a paper knife, she would seldom have so much as looked inside the reviews or quarterlies which heaped the study table, or have made even a passing acquaintance with the piles of current literature that came down in the monthly box from Mudie's, and which Marjory, to whom a new book was one of the luxuries of life, eagerly enough turned over in

quest of some dainty morsel, or more substantial food.

She was skilled, however, in all those old-fashioned household accomplishments which of late years have fallen considerably into the background in the curriculum of female education, and she had been at pains, moreover, to make her niece Marjory as proficient in even their more recondite branches as she was herself. "*Can do*," she was wont to say, is easily carried about. It was cruelty to a girl to bring her up in ignorance of what belongs to good housewifery, just because she was not likely in after-life to be under the necessity of acting as her own maid-of-all-work. You might as well, she would say, decline to teach the classics and mathematics to a boy because algebra and Euclid were not needed in writing a sermon, or because the Greek grammar would not help a man in fighting his country's battles.

So Marjory was duly initiated into those homely mysteries of which most modern young ladies know about as much as they do of the scenery round the North Pole; nor was her graceful girlhood one whit impaired by her skil-

fulness in the various domestic arts. Rather it seemed to bring her into a certain sweet accord with the home in which she dwelt. She was like a flower rooted where it bloomed, not plucked and set for ornament alone. Everywhere there was the touch of her hand, the impress of her thought. It was Marjory's claret-cup which made thirst a luxury on summer afternoons; Marjory who, with her quick young eyes and deft fingers, mended Miss Millicent's old point-lace till you could not tell where a frayed place had been in all the precious fabric; Marjory whose daily task it was, for she alone could be trusted with it, to dust and arrange amid the complicated litter of the Canon's study-table. Her aunt regarded her with complacency, with feminine prevision forecasting the time when in a home of her own she would do yet ampler credit to the training she had received. The Canon laid his hand sometimes with a mute caress on the girl's brown locks, and thought wistfully of what might be awaiting her amid the sundry and manifold changes which life must surely bring. But each was secretly conscious that the pleas-

ant old rectory house would lose its subtlest charm with Marjory away.

This was a theme, however, on which the brother and sister seldom exchanged confidences. Miss Daylmer's views and wishes secretly tended in a direction from which the Canon's doubtfully diverged. It was the one point in their lives on which they were not in mutual accord. Though the Canon never openly expressed disapprobation of Marjory's cousin Pelham, or discouraged his visits to the rectory when he chose to come, still it was evident that he was by no means disposed to regard him favourably. And, considering the many advantages which the young man possessed, his good prospects, his good looks, and his agreeable manners, Miss Daylmer could not help thinking that any prejudice against him on account of Marjory was just a little to be regretted on her brother's part.

Indeed, bearing in mind that Marjory's father, the late Mr. Percival Elphinstone, had looked forward to the possibility of a union between the two cousins, and, in the event of such a contingency, had made provision for it in

his will, she thought his wishes should be a little more deferred to than they were. But Miss Daylmer was a thorough gentlewoman, the very soul of honour, and, though naturally inclined to support her own opinions, she would not for the world have betrayed her trust by surreptitiously smoothing the way for Pelham, should the easy intercourse of cousinship seem likely to develop into a warmer feeling.

At present, however, there was nothing to indicate that Pelham had any other motive in his visits to the rectory than to while away the time which, when he was at home, hung somewhat heavily on his hands. He had a great turn for enjoying life. He liked to be with others who enjoyed it too; and though in some respects the rectory was not more to his tastes than the Priory itself, at all events there it was never dull. So he came and went when he chanced to be down at Marholm, which was not very often now, and was received there courteously by the Canon, cordially by Miss Daylmer. As for Marjory, she liked her cousin after a cousinly fashion, a little critically, perhaps, and with more inclination, on the whole, to look

at him from her uncle's point of view than from her aunt's; but still he was so gay and handsome and debonnaire, and it really was so dismal, poor fellow, for him at home, that it would be too bad not to treat him kindly when he came.

There was not much young society within reach of Marholm; plenty of middle-aged and elderly people, but scarcely anyone near her own age with whom Marjory, who was rather fastidious in her friendships, cared to be on terms of intimacy. With Cousin Pelham she was intimate as a matter of course, in that easy, indifferent way which is the privilege of cousinship. He might have been different in some respects, and she would have liked him none the worse for it; indeed, there were a good many little things which kept her from feeling in complete accord with him; but still his coming gave a certain sparkle and brilliance to the clear, still wine of life, which made the girl rather glad than otherwise when he happened to be down at Marholm on his short and somewhat infrequent visits.

There was a little stir of excitement in the atmosphere when the Canon came home after his meeting with Mr. Beverley in the Chase, and announced that the stranger would dine with them on the following day.

"To-morrow!" echoed Miss Millicent, her thoughts flashing to the state of the rectory larder, and the question as to how far its resources might avail on such limited notice to furnish fit entertainment for an invited guest. "To-morrow! and I told Penelope this morning to cook those ducks which have been hanging for a week. I wish I could have known just a few hours earlier. It is a thousand chances if the creams and jellies set properly such weather as this, unless they are made the day before, and Penelope is so distressed if things do not turn out well."

"But it is scarcely an hour since I met the young man, and to-morrow is the only evening that I have this week," explained the Canon, secretly conscious of having given just such another impromptu invitation not ten days ago to a neighbouring vicar and to one of the cathedral

prebendaries. "We will have the Johannisberger again, and never mind about the creams and jellies."

"I don't think this Mr. Beverley will mind about them himself, Auntie," said Marjory, as Miss Daylmer, with a sigh of resignation, disappeared to take counsel with Penelope. "Do you know, Uncle Bernard, I am certain I saw him this afternoon as I was going through the Chase. He was leaning on that gate, just before you turn down to the woodman's cottage, and he opened it to let me pass. I am glad you have asked him; we shall hear all about Rome now."

"I should have thought you heard enough about it from Cecilia Danvers," said the Canon. "Four pages crossed, only the other day, about the Coliseum and the Pantheon and their picnic among the ruins of Hadrian's Villa."

"Ah! but this Mr. Beverley's Rome will be a different one altogether from that of Cecilia Danvers," returned Marjory. "It would be the glory and the beauty of the eternal city that he would see, not just the contents of Murray's or somebody's handbook."

The Canon turned on her a glance of quizzical inquiry.

"How do you know that, Marjory? You seem to have come to a very confident conclusion, considering the opportunities you have had for observation."

"How do I know?" laughed Marjory. "I can't tell, I am sure; but I do know. It must have been something in his face, I suppose, that told me all about him when I saw him this afternoon leaning on that gate. He was feeding on what he saw, living in it, getting the whole bouquet and essence of it, just like that little roly-poly vicar the other day with your Johannisberger."

"Don't be irreverent, Marjory," said the Canon. "That little roly-poly vicar, as you call him, was Double-first of his year, and is the finest Greek scholar in the diocese."

"That did not prevent him from appreciating your Johannisberger," retorted Marjory, "nor help him to be a more entertaining companion either. Confess now, Uncle Bernard, that he was just a little dull. I saw your eyes stealing round to the time-piece more than once before

dinner was over. Though, indeed, I think all learned men are a little dull. I never knew but one who was not, or perhaps two. Dean Longley is not dull; but then, to be sure, he is rather literary than learned, and that makes a difference."

"And pray who is the other learned man who is so happy as not to be considered dull?" demanded the canon.

"Oh, Canon Daylmer, of course!" replied the girl. "I should never dream of calling him dull; though he knows as much, I daresay, as all the roly-poly vicars in the diocese, about those tiresome little Greek particles that spoiled our dinner last week. Do promise, Uncle Bernard, that when Mr. Beverley comes you will not let him get into tedious tracks. Keep him well to Rome, will you? I want to hear all about it, and what it looks like and feels like to an artist."

"I promise," said the Canon, with an indulgent smile. "You may content yourself, Marjory. I don't think we shall be troubled much to-morrow either with Greek particles or any other form of dulness."

"There now!" cried the girl, triumphantly, "I knew I was right, though I did not know why. But I must go to Aunt Millicent. I have just thought of something. I shall ask her to let me make a mayonnaise and velvet-cream myself this evening. I can change my dress and do it easily after dinner. Then she will be satisfied, and poor Penelope will not be worried, and I can take what is left of the cream to those sick children in the cottages at the Low Flats. It will be just a little dainty for each of them; only the worst of it is that going down there makes me so vexed with Uncle Elphinstone. He ought not to let his people live in such wretched old hovels. No wonder there is always sickness there. Even Pelham says that he is ashamed of them."

"Marjory," said the Canon, "if you are going to your aunt, give her this letter of Lord Danvers. I had forgotten that it was in my pocket."

The state of the cottages at the Low Flats was a sore point with the Canon, but Mr. Elphinstone was Marjory's uncle, as well as one of her guardians. It might be his wish, as well

as her father's, that Marjory should one day be mistress at the Priory, and the Canon too had his points of honour.

CHAPTER VI.

A ROSE IN JUNE.

POETS and anchorites may say what they will about the superiority of soul to sense, and the advantage of dwelling exclusively in the upper stories of our nature, and abandoning the basement altogether. But philosophers know better. Hunger, they assure us, is the basis of civilization; and all wise men, and women too, seeing that, besides chambers lighted only from above, there do exist also in the structure of our humanity others built not wholly above the level of the earth, will conclude that, being there, they were meant to be inhabited. And instead of locking them up, shutting out heaven's light, and leaving them to the moles and bats, they will rather set open their windows to the sunshine, garnish them with

all manner of pleasant and dainty device, and so make them sweet and wholesome places of abode.

Which, in other words, is equivalent to saying that to prefer a mean and ill-served dinner to one on which a certain amount of care and taste has been expended, is by no means an infallible proof of a superior order of mind.

"It is not hospitality," the Canon used to say, "to invite a man to your table and treat him as if his only avenue to enjoyment were through his palate. It is an insult to a guest to imagine that in presenting to him a luxurious bill of fare you fulfil all the obligations of a host. But neither is it hospitality to make his repast a penance to him, and to set before him such sorry fare that a wholesome regard for consequences would incline him to fast altogether where it was impossible to feast."

Nothing, Hugh thought, could be more thoroughly delightful than that little dinner of four which put its crown of enjoyment upon the close of his first day of successful toil. There was a charm of leisurely completeness about it, a fine blending of those diverse elements which must meet and mingle to secure

the full social satisfaction of creatures so variously compounded as ourselves. Rather a contrast, perhaps, in its cultured grace, to the Bohemianism of his entertainment the other evening; but perfect in its higher fashion, as the keeper's hospitality had been after a humbler kind. Picturesque, too, in its accessories, and full of contentment for his artistic taste; though, instead of the smoke-blackened rafters, the whitewashed walls and homely furnishings over which the light from the blazing logs had cast such splendid effects of *chiaro-scuro*, there was now the mellow sunlight falling aslant through folds of crimson damask upon the rich carving of an antique sideboard, glancing hither and thither over delicate crystal and rare old china, or flashing back from the polished surface of well-worn massy silver, that looked as if it had been in use for two or three generations at the least.

And instead of his fustian-coated host, rough-hewn as a bit of millstone grit, there sat beside him the Canon and Miss Daylmer, both with the mint-mark of "the quality," as good Mistress Boynton would phrase it, stamped unmistake-

ably upon them. And instead of that gipsy-looking damsel whose vivid beauty had flashed like a jewel amidst its homely setting, there was—yes, he had found his Dryad of the woods again! And a pleasant finding it had been when, as he passed up the gravel sweep and by the wide-open oriel window of the rectory drawing-room, he had caught a glimpse of the same brown-tressed head around which he had watched the sunbeams the day before weaving their golden coronet.

Nay, was there not something more than pleasantness beneath? just a hint of that vague content, and unrest vaguer still, which had sent his vagrant fancy wandering, he knew not whither, as he leaned on that five-barred gate in Marholm Chase? He had pulled up pretty sharply then, when he found himself astray. There was work to be done, hard work, too; and that graceful, grey-clad figure was leading him quite out of the track that he had meant to pursue. Things were different now. His day's work lay behind him; a day of fiery successful toil; a glorious beginning of his three months' task. He felt the glow and *verve* of it

still in every vein, its after-shine upon his brow. And yet, with it all, something, too, of that delicious languor which comes when the full strain of energy is past, and when a man is disposed, perhaps more than at any other time, to yield himself half passively to the influence of the hour, to lay down the oar that he has plied so hardly and so long, and suffer the sun-lit tide on which he floats to bear him idly along at its own sweet will.

His good genius befriended him, Hugh thought, as the Canon, after presenting him to Miss Daylmer, turned and introduced him to his niece. The girl looked up and gave him her hand, with a smile of amused recognition, which, to that of the day before, was as the clear morning sunshine to the misty gleam of dawn. There was the same hint of veiled stateliness about her which there had been when he saw her in the Chase, just the faintest *soupçon* of what, with a smile less frank, might have been taken for hauteur; perhaps not without reason when the smile was absent, though at other times you could no more have found fault with it than with the mossy veil that guards the treasure of the rose.

"I thought I had seen Mr. Beverley before," she said, in those soft ringing tones whose cadence when Hugh had heard them before seemed to linger on the ear after the sound was gone. "I was quite sorry to disturb your meditations yesterday."

"Indeed," said Hugh, bowing low, "I was never more ashamed than to have been so slow in seeing you. The truth is, everything seemed so utterly silent and secluded that I was conscious of nothing but the solitude around me."

"Secluded!" echoed the Canon, with a lurking humour in his voice. "I hope, Mr. Beverley, you have not come down to this out-of-the-way spot with the idea of seclusion in your mind. "Why, already your arrival has been announced to me at least a dozen times; in fact, it is the topic of the day among our rustic population. I will venture to say that good Mrs. Boynton had twice as many guests as usual last night in her sanded parlour, drawn together expressly to collect all possible particulars concerning the stranger."

"I am extremely flattered," said Hugh. "Marholm does me too much honour."

"Not at all," returned the Canon. "The advent of a stranger, you know, is somewhat of an event for us. Besides, we are a social folk, and take a friendly interest in one another's concerns. Marholm has its faults, but with them all there is as much genuine kindness, I believe, in it as in any place you could find that is not an absolute Elysium."

"If first impressions are to be depended on," said Hugh, "I should say that, if not an absolute Elysium, Marholm is, at least, a very near approach to one."

Miss Daylmer's comfortable accents interposed.

"You will charm my brother if you continue in that strain, Mr. Beverley. Nothing delights him more than to hear anyone sound the praises of his beloved Marholm."

"They are genuine, I can assure you, in my case, Miss Daylmer," said Hugh, heartily. "Not that I can boast of a very lengthy experience; but what I have seen during the last forty-eight hours disposes me entirely to agree with Dr. Daylmer."

"My experience," said the Canon, and, as he

spoke, a look of wistful tenderness stole for an instant across his face, "my experience goes back thirty years into the past. Marholm has changed a good deal in that time, both the people and the place; but I can truly say I never loved it more than I do this day."

"Nor I either," echoed Marjory. "Dear old Marholm! I do think it is the sweetest spot on earth."

"My dear Marjory," observed her uncle, the lurking humour in his voice again, "you have had such extensive opportunities of comparing it with the other sweet spots on earth that your judgment, I must confess, carries weight with it."

Marjory laughed gaily.

"Uncle Bernard! you are so very precise. I only meant that if I had seen all the sweetest spots on earth I should still think Marholm sweeter still."

"Unanswerable logic!" said the Canon, with a gesture of the hand which seemed to imply his helplessness before this feminine form of argument.

Just then the door opened, and old Caleb, the

butler, gardener, coachman, and general factotum of the rectory household, bowing low, broke up the discussion by the announcement of dinner.

Then came the dinner, that perfect little dinner, in the cosy oak-panelled dining-room, with the sunlight and the sweet fresh air, and the scent of mignonette and roses coming in through the wide open window, mingling with the fragrance of dainty dishes, prepared according to Miss Daylmer's famous hereditary receipts, and with the delicate aroma of the Canon's wines.

A very feast of the gods, it seemed to Hugh, who for seven solitary weeks had never once sat down to meat in company, except the other evening at supper in the keeper's cottage. Eating alone is to all genial souls the very dullest of Nature's tasks, as void of the subtler elements of pleasure as the shovelling of coals upon an engine fire; but at the Canon's table the daily meal was a sort of social sacrament, a joyous communion, in which the common things of food and wine served not their common purpose only, but made those who ate and

drank together feel that they shared for the time in each other's life, and that the bonds of home or hospitality were no shadows, but warm and strong realities. There was a spirit breathing through it all, of which the material entertainment was but the pleasant symbol; the spirit of genuine good will by which the Canon drew all about him into accord with himself and one another.

Hugh felt the kindly glow, as the brown chestnut in its prickly burr feels the sunlight falling warm outside. It had been sweet and restful to his jaded senses yesterday to find himself alone in that still greenwood, and after the dust and turmoil of city streets, and the dreariness of London lodgings, to feel around him the freshness and the tenderness of Nature. But sweeter still, and more full of restfulness, was this atmosphere of home which, at the rectory, like a fine fragrance filled the air, and gave their keenest zest to the pleasures of the hour. A man without a home of his own, and with no woman to make one for him, is more sensitive, perhaps, than others to this simple household charm. So simple it was, as Hugh felt

it now; such a common everyday thing, just these three people, all strangers to him until yesterday, sitting down to their daily meal, himself sharing it with them as their guest. And yet, what a pleasant grace upon it all! How genial and cordial was the Canon, and what a comfortable picture Miss Daylmer made, sitting in that high-backed carved oak chair, in her soft lustrous dress of silver-grey poplin, with that creamy old lace about her face and neck and hands; comely still, despite her fifty years, and with a certain gracious calm in all her ways that seemed, like mellow sunlight, to diffuse itself over the little circle.

Beside them, content and safe as a nested bird, the girl Marjory, sitting silent mostly, with that bright crested head, and stately white throat, and eyes that drew him like a spell. Like a June rose, Mrs. Boynton had said, for freshness and bloom; and looking at her as she sat just opposite to him, a great bowl full of roses making a fragrant barrier between them, Hugh thought that Mrs. Boynton was right.

Even old Caleb, standing behind his master's

chair, in snuff-coloured coat, and drab smalls, and red-plush waistcoat, and grey hair well brushed up, reflected from his wizened visage a certain austere urbanity, as of one who felt it incumbent on him to uphold the honour of the house, and to sanction by his own approval any attention that might be paid to a stranger and a guest. Caleb had views of his own with respect to visitors, and did not always condescend to his present blandness of behaviour. Twenty years' waiting at the rectory table had been to him as a kind of liberal education. He was a connoisseur in conversation, and if, through any defect or dulness on the part of a guest, it fell below what he considered as the proper standard of entertainment, he was wont to express his sense of this social dereliction by a severity of demeanour at once edifying and distressing to behold.

But to-day Caleb's approval was complete. Hugh more than once suppressed a smile at the undisguised attention with which the worthy servitor lent an ear to what was going on. For the Canon had kept his promise. The talk was of Rome. Not the Rome of the guide-

books—Marjory's ready instinct had divined aright—but the eternal city as Hugh had seen it, beautiful and glorious, holding all hearts in an imperial sway.

"And were you, like everyone else, sorry to leave Rome, Mr. Beverley?" asked Miss Daylmer, when Hugh with vivid words had been picturing it before them, telling them, too, of his artist life, and of his studio high up in an attic in the *Via Margutta*, and of the wonderful view that spread far away over the *Campagna*.

"In truth, I was," answered Hugh, carelessly, yet with an unconscious accent of regret. "If I had not been a poor artist, with a commission that I could not afford to refuse, I would have been there still, with my attic and my easel and my Italian *marruccio*."

"Ah, that was the real Elysium!" said Marjory, in a tone of light reproach. "Our poor little Marholm is the imitation, and Rome the reality."

"Not quite," said Hugh, with a smile, glancing as he spoke across the table to the flower-like head opposite, which drooped now a little from its stateliness, like a rose upon its stalk. "Not

quite, or I could not have torn myself away at all. But it was very near to it; as near, I think, as any place on earth."

"It is strange," interposed the Canon, "what fascination there is in Rome; what a mystery of attraction she exerts over everyone alike. Other places one may admire for their architecture, their antiquities, their splendour, or their picturesqueness; but Rome's charm lies deeper still. She is beautiful, but it is the beauty of a face one loves."

"Then she is like Marholm," said Marjory, a gentle triumph in her voice, "and there are two Elysiums on earth."

"Only two, Marjory?" inquired the Canon, leaning back in his chair and turning upon her a look of indulgent pride. "Would not any place be an Elysium to us if we loved it well enough to think so?"

"Yes, I suppose it would," returned the girl, musingly. "Only with most places the difficulty is even to begin to like them well enough for that. Now with Marholm you cannot help it; and yet, just as you say of Rome, you can hardly tell what draws you so. It is not the

thatched cottages, and the sunny little gardens, and the deep lanes, and the dear old church, and the woods, and the beech-tree on the green. It is just a charm about it that somehow makes Marholm seem like a leaf out of some beautiful story, as different as possible from any other village. Now, is it not so? Say I am right, Uncle Bernard; for I know you think so in your heart."

They were sitting at dessert now, in those delicious commencing moments which some one has called the poetic stage of dinner. Only the flowers and wine and fruit were left upon the table. The evening air came softly in, and stirred the perfume that rose from the great porcelain bowl filled with vine-leaves and clasping tendrils and roses which Marjory had brought in that morning with the dew still on them; roses, damask and white and blush, heaped together in masses of glowing colour, or scattered and coyly hidden among the cool contrasting leafage. There were early strawberries, Caleb's peculiar pride, the first of the year, gathered in honour of the guest. Strawberries which, as Miss Daylmer explained, were

the very joy of Caleb's heart, a choice variety of which the rectory garden and hothouse at present possessed the sole monopoly. And indeed it was a study to behold the mingled expression of complacency and tenderness with which he set them on the table; to be admired and praised, and then, alas! to vanish for ever from his sight. And there was the precious *Johannisberger*, brought out, too, in honour of the guest, a little fountain of limpid life and generous delight. Even that, Caleb, whose heart-strings Hugh unwittingly had touched, set on the table with a contented air; though, as a rule, never dragon watched more jealously over the golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides than did Caleb over the finer vintages in his master's cellar.

He had betaken himself at last to his own quarters, after lingering as long as his sense of propriety permitted; but, as Marjory spoke, he re-appeared at the door, and, with a long-drawn, mysterious face, signalled to his master that he was wanted outside.

CHAPTER VII.

A QUIET EVENING.

THE Canon rose, and left the room, and for a moment silence fell upon the little group.

"Something is the matter," said Miss Daylmer, in a serious tone. "Caleb had his very longest face."

"Perhaps the Willetts' baby is worse, and they have sent for Uncle Bernard to baptize it," suggested Marjory. "It was very ill yesterday, I know."

"Surely not!" said her aunt. "Poor Nancy will break her heart if she loses it."

There was a sound of distant voices at the side door in the hall, a woman's sobbing voice; then the Canon came back, looking grave and anxious.

"George Burrell is ill," he said, answering the inquiring eyes that met him. "Dying, they fear."

"Dying!" exclaimed Miss Daylmer. "Poor fellow! Why, he was at church on Sunday. What is the matter with him?"

"Fever," said the Canon. "Diphtheria, I suspect, from what his daughter says. He only took to his bed on Tuesday, and the doctor has told them to-day there is no hope for him. They should have let me know before that he was ill. I must go down to the Hollow at once and see him."

Miss Daylmer made no reply. Marjory looked with wistful eyes into her uncle's face. It would be of no avail, they were well aware, to attempt to dissuade him from going to the fever-stricken house. The duty that lay nearest to him, whatever it might be, that the Canon took, and straightway performed; only the more promptly if courage or self-sacrifice were needed for the doing of it. Without a thought of hesitation he put aside now the leisurely enjoyment of an evening with his

guest for the anxious and even hazardous task before him.

"I am sorry, very sorry, to have to leave you so abruptly," he said, as he shook hands with Hugh. "And I fear, too, that I ought not to see you on my return. When I visit a case of this kind I generally keep myself in quarantine until the next day. Not that the precaution is absolutely needful, for I have what I call my 'fever suit,' which I put on to go in, and put off the moment I return. Still, if we trust Providence, we must not tempt it; and where there is any suspicion of danger it is always best to err on the safe side. No, no; I would rather you stayed," he added, for Hugh was proposing to accompany him in his walk. "I could not reconcile it to my conscience as a host to drag you out for half an hour's walk the moment after dinner, with the chance of returning by yourself, too. I will leave you to the ladies now, and hope another time to be more fortunate myself. They will take you into the church. We have some fine old monuments there, and some curious wood-carving of the fifteenth century, that you may like to see. Ring the

bell, Marjory; and tell Caleb to bring me up a bottle of port, and to fill me a good-sized phial with Condy's Fluid. These poor folks will have neither, I expect, and the one will be as needful as the other."

"Ah! yours are practical ministrations, I see," said Hugh, approvingly. "They take into account corporeal as well as spiritual needs."

"Poor souls! yes," said the Canon, pouring himself out a glass of wine and drinking it as he stood. "I don't believe in the religion of asceticism myself; but neither do I believe in the religion of selfishness, which can look on quietly while others are suffering for want of what we enjoy ourselves. But I have fortified myself, and now I must go at once. Good-bye, all of you." And with a wave of his hand, and a cheerful glance at his sister and Marjory, he went out, and the three sat down again in the deserted room.

They did not stay there long. Their bright discourse had been broken in upon, and none of them seemed able without an effort to resume it. Marjory seemed *distraite*, and Miss Dayl-

mer, whose *forte* was always rather to listen than to lead in conversation, proposed that they should adjourn from table and go round the garden to look at the roses; or, if Mr. Beverley would like to do so, they could take him, as the Canon had suggested, into the church.

"Let us go into the garden, Aunt Millicent," pleaded Marjory, "and leave the church for another time. You know Uncle Bernard likes to be his own cicerone. He always enjoys so much showing strangers over the church; more, very often, than they enjoy seeing it themselves. It was very good of him to say we might take Mr. Beverley in."

Hugh looked a little quizzical.

"I am afraid you do not think so highly of the church as you do of the rest of Marholm, Miss Elphinstone."

"Indeed I do," she said. "The carving in it is really very quaint and fine. But you do not know what a luxury it is to Uncle Bernard to exhibit it himself, especially to anyone who can appreciate it properly. Everyone here knows it by heart; and then many people who come

from a distance care nothing about such things, and don't see half the beauties that he points out. They would admire a piece of machine carving, with every pattern turned out exactly the same, more by far than this exquisite old work, where the artist worked as Nature does, and where no two leaves are to be found alike."

Marjory had her way. There was a sweet persistence in her voice when she chose to plead in earnest that generally gained her point for her. Miss Daylmer consented; all the more willingly, perhaps, because her roses were really as much her pride as the carvings in the church were the delight of her brother's heart, and she enjoyed as much the prospect of exhibiting their glories. She put a light shawl over her shoulders, and the three went out into the old-fashioned rose-scented garden of the rectory.

The warmth of sunset was in the air. The shadows lay upon the grass, and on the smooth gravelled sweep in front of the house. The sky behind the old fir-trees glowed rosy red, the vane on the church-tower above them turned its golden finger to the west. All over the

garden there was a flush of blossom upon the shadowy foliage. How peaceful it was! how full of rest and bloom and fragrance! And how beautiful Marjory was as she wandered hither and thither among the flowery clumps, the climbing and the standard roses, whose varied beauties Miss Daylmer, with looks of beaming satisfaction, was displaying to her guest, and which he, as in duty bound, was admiring to her heart's content.

How beautiful she was! That was the thought which had entered and possessed his mind, and which continually drew away his eyes from the splendours of some magnificent "*Gloire de Dijon*," or the delicate loveliness of "*Lady Lilian*," to that flower-like head, so much more beautiful, it seemed to him, than anything else in all that sweet old garden. And yet, as the girl had said of Marholm, it was hard to tell what drew him so. Hugh owned to himself that it was not at all the beauty of a perfect face which so attracted him. For one thing, the chin was too firmly moulded. It was a very distinctive, characteristic chin, full of sense and resolution, but not by any means the

diminutive classical ideal. The nose, too, was just a shade larger than the canons of beauty demanded; only the large, wistful eyes, with their long dark lashes and clearly pencilled brows, gave a strange depth and tenderness to the face, and toned down a certain more than girlish stateliness which, as we have said, might pass with strangers for hauteur or reserve.

She strayed here and there among the roses, keeping mostly at a little distance from her aunt and their guest. Evidently she was concerned about her uncle, and Hugh, seeing that it was a relief to her to be silent, stifled his wish to draw her again into the conversation, and resigned himself with a good grace to the elder lady and her roses.

There was a fine considerateness about Hugh, despite his somewhat careless bearing; and a power of self-sacrifice in little things, less common than some might suppose. Perhaps Marjory noticed it, and was willing to make courteous amends; for when at last they returned to the house, and after they had had coffee in the drawing-room, she smiled not ungraciously when Hugh went towards the open

piano, and, without any affectation of demur, sat down to give him the song that he begged to have before he left.

She played a few rich, full chords that seemed to unclose the gates of harmony, and then, softly at first, her voice stole forth.

> "Oh! Mary, call the cattle home,
> Across the sands o' Dee."

The sweet sad tones rose and fell, and rose again, with a surging sea-like cadence, now sinking into pathos, then rising into passionate lament; dying away at last in the long echoing refrain. As Hugh listened, it seemed to him as if a curtain were being lifted from some innermost recess, within which the sweet girl-soul sat singing to itself, weaving its own romance and tenderness into the music of the ballad. He looked at her, and her face, he thought, grew more beautiful as she sang, full of an unconscious power, a strength of womanhood, that seemed for a moment to hold his heart in thrall. At last she ceased.

"It is one of Uncle Bernard's favourites," she said; and there was a sigh in her voice as she

spoke. "I often sing it to him. But I will find a gayer one, if you would like. This is a little sad, perhaps."

"No," said Hugh. "If I might be allowed to choose, I would rather hear this one again."

She looked at him with a smile.

"Would you, really? It is a favourite, then, of yours as well?"

Hugh smiled in return.

"It is so now," he said. And Marjory sang it again, and then she sang another, and another; Scotch songs that Miss Daylmer asked for. Hugh leaned back in his chair, and listened silently. There were no leaves to turn over. It was growing dusk at the end of the large, unlighted room, and Marjory was singing from memory now. There was a half melancholy cadence in her voice. She seemed to have forgotten him, and to be singing, more for her own relief and solace than for any pleasure of his, the plaintive old ballads that chimed in with her anxious mood.

At last she ceased, and rose from the piano. Hugh rose too. That last half hour had been very pleasant, full of dreamy, still delight. It

was as if he had been floating idly along in some Venetian gondola, rocking on the dark, smooth tide, with the chant of the gondolier sounding in his ears, with the summer moonlight overhead, and shadowy palaces looming past. It was over now. He seemed to feel the bump of the gondola against the water stairs. And Marjory was a singing voice no longer, but Miss Elphinstone once again, with that subtle air of distance in her manner which came and went, how and when he could hardly tell, like the shadows on a changing sea.

"We shall be more fortunate, I hope, the next time you come," said Miss Daylmer, in her cordial, comfortable tones, as they said good-bye at the rectory porch. "This has been such a very quiet evening."

So it had; that last half hour especially; a very quiet evening. Then why should it have left such a strange restlessness behind it? Hugh lit a cigar when he was fairly outside the rectory gates, and instead of going straight back to his quarters at the "Danvers Arms," he turned into the Chase, and strolled on there for

a mile or more, in the soft twilight gloom, towards the spot that he had chosen for his picture.

There was a soothing companionship for him in his favourite weed. Many a time it had beguiled him of his cares, and wrapped him in a mantle of content, and interposed its fragrant barrier between himself and all the worries and vexations and disappointments of this troublesome world. But to-night the restlessness within seemed proof against its potency, and no barrier of fragrant fumes could keep away from him that sweet stately head, or the wistful eyes, or the smile which, as he remembered it, seemed like sunlight on the petals of a rose. He smoked out his cigar, and lit another, and, just as it was finished, found himself at the door of the "Danvers Arms," with Marjory's voice still echoing in his ears the musical, melancholy refrain—

> "Oh! Mary, call the cattle home,
> Across the sands o' Dee."

He flung away the glowing end of his Havannah with a half impatient gesture.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed to himself, as he straightened his broad shoulders and went through the low, wide doorway of the inn,—"Good heavens! what a fool I am!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MADGE.

IT was just half-past three by the big painted clock that was ticking lazily away in the corner of the kitchen at the keeper's cottage. The sunshine was streaming through the open doorway, lying warm and still upon the fresh-sanded floor, and rousing into a perfect ecstasy of song a redcap, whose cage hung from a beam in the middle of the ceiling. The kettle, too, was singing, though in a more subdued strain, over the fire, and a blue-bottle fly was humming and buzzing against the little diamonded panes of the lattice window; while, to complete the chorus, Madge's clear voice rang gaily out, as she sang to herself, over her work,

> "Merry is it now in the good greenwood,
> When the mavis and merle are singing."

Now she went on through a whole verse; then she made a meditative pause; then, for a line or two, she recommenced, and at last broke off altogether, fairly lost in the depth of her deliberations. For it was important business in which Madge was engaged, and she had just arrived at a critical stage in the proceedings. She was trimming the new summer hat which she meant to wear at church the next morning.

There were other things to be worn for the first time as well as the hat, but these were already finished. Chief among them was the new print dress, the prettiest, Madge thought, that she had ever had: a white ground, with a little geranium-coloured pattern upon it, and a scarf of the same material, tied with long ends behind, as near as she could make it like those which the Miss Martendales, at the White House, used to wear last summer. True, theirs were of lavender-coloured, corded silk, and this of hers was only a ninepenny print; but Madge had tried on her ninepenny print dress and scarf before the looking-glass upstairs in her little bed-room, and had been quite satisfied with the effect. With a bit of lace in the top of the

dress, and a single red rosebud just where the scarf fastened over her bosom, she was aware that she looked a great deal better than even the Miss Martendales themselves in their rustling silks, with their limp, flat figures, and washed-out complexions.

There would be more than one pair of eyes in church to-morrow that would pass by the White House pew, and others too, to glance up at the singing loft, where she would be sitting in all the glory of her new attire. Ralph Burton, to begin with, though he counted for nothing now; nor Mark Staniland either, for what was Mark but a plain wheelwright's son? And as to Ralph Burton, he had looked at her in church so often and so long that she would not care if he got as tired of it as she was beginning to be herself. There was that quiet-spoken Elizabeth Welby, who sat next her in the singing loft, would be glad enough, no doubt, to help him on a little, if he would give her the chance. Not that Ralph Burton was likely to take up with Elizabeth Welby, or indeed with anyone else in the village, for the matter of that. Madge knew well enough who it was that he had made up his mind about,

and what he meant by coming to their cottage so often as he did, and bringing her fairings from St. Bede's fair, and always waiting round after evening church for the chance of setting her home.

But it was not of her rustic beaux that Madge, in her secret heart, was thinking, as she contemplated her appearance at church to-morrow in all the bravery of her new attire. Some one else would be pretty sure to look up to where she sat in the singing loft; some one in the Priory pew, who seemed to have found out what Madge had only to look in the glass to see for herself. Mr. Pelham, she was convinced, admired her quite as much as anyone else in Marholm did. Why else should he have chosen to sit just where he could get a good view of her, both the Sundays that he had been at home, when the side of the pew next the wall was so much more comfortable than that facing the singing loft? And how was it that she caught his eye upon her every time she happened to look down after the sermon began? If Mr. Pelham had admired her in her old last year's gown, that she had worn all through the

spring, what would he think of her when he saw her in the new flowered print, with the frilled scarf and fresh-trimmed hat? Madge fed her vanity on the thought of those admiring looks. That was a different thing altogether from being envied by Elizabeth Welby, and the rest of the Marholm girls; more flattering by far than having Ralph Burton or Mark Staniland waiting about at the church porch, with their bits of flowers and things, wanting to set her home.

She held her hat in her hand, and wreathed the ribbon with which it was to be trimmed this way and that about it; but she could not satisfy herself. The ribbon was too narrow, and there was not enough of it to make the loops and puffs as they ought to be made. It was very provoking. Do what she would, the hat looked as prim and quiet as a Quaker's. It wanted a bit of colour, too, somewhere, to brighten it up. A nice rose, now, or a crimson bow just a little on one side, would show against her dark hair and make it look everything that could be wished. How stupid she had been to let the milliner at St. Bede's per-

suade her into having a white trimming because it was going to be more fashionable this summer than colours. That cold-looking bow coming against her face would turn it quite dull and brown, and it was too late now to get anything else from St. Bede's, even if she could have afforded it, which she could not; for she had stretched a point as it was to get print enough for making her frillings and scarf.

It was too bad to have everything spoiled just for the sake of a yard or two of ribbon. Madge felt as if she could almost have cried with vexation. She was looking disconsolately at her unlucky purchase, when a shadow fell across the doorway, and a white and tan puppy, that was lying with its nose between its paws in the sunny space upon the floor, jumped up and began to yelp and bark furiously at a little wiry man, with a pedler's pack upon his back, who had set his foot across the threshold.

"A fine day, Miss. I was round this way, and I thought I would just look in and see if there was anything in my line I could accommodate you with."

And the pedler, who already had heaved

round his pack from his shoulder, took a step forward into the kitchen, and let down his burden upon the snowy deal table by which Madge was sitting.

"There is nothing to-day, Mr. Duffill," she said, her face brightening, nevertheless, at sight of the well-filled pack. "You are over-late in coming. I was at St. Bede's market last week, and my summer things are all bought and made, or will be when I get my hat finished trimming."

"That's a pity, now," returned the pedler. "I'll warrant I could have done better for you than any of the St. Bede's shops. They lay on so much in the price, by reason of having their rents to make out of the profits, that it is nothing but ruination dealing with them. Or if they don't lay it on in the price, they take it out in the quality of the article. Rags and rubbish—rags and rubbish! That's what it is they give you. You wouldn't buy a ribbin, now, like this here of yours, out of my pack," he added, with a contemptuous glance at Madge's meagre finery. "I'd be ashamed to sell such a shabby article for your wearing. I have one

here I should like to show you, just to let you see what a ribbin should be."

"It's a pity to trouble yourself, Mr. Duffill," said Madge, though in a less decided tone than before, for she was longing inwardly to see the contents of the pack. "It will only be to tie up again. I am not wanting to buy."

"Nor I am not asking you, either," replied the wily dealer, unfastening the strings of his pack with business-like despatch. "It is just for the pleasure of showing you the goods, and if you don't say that this here ribbin of mine is the handsomest ever you saw, my name is not Joshua Duffill. Real Coventry it is; same pattern as one that was wove on purpose for the Princess of Wales."

With these words Joshua drew forth and unfurled with a flourish before Madge's admiring eyes a piece of broad brocaded ribbon; white, with crimson flowers, the very thing to match her dress.

"Ay, I knew what you would say to that! It's something like a ribbin; the very identical pattern as the Princess wore, and uncommon well it would become you. One and tenpence

halfpenny a yard, worth two and six at the very least. I wish I could afford to make you a present of it. It goes against me, it does indeed," added Joshua, with another glance of contempt in the direction of Madge's purchase, "that you should have nothing no better for Sunday wear than such a shabby skreed of stuff as you have got there."

It did look shabby, Madge thought; shabbier than ever. She shook her head, but dubiously.

"It's to no use, Mr. Duffill," she said. "You may as well put it up again. I couldn't afford it; I really couldn't. I have spent over-much already."

But Joshua knew better than to put the gay temptation out of sight. He laid it aside, just where the afternoon sunlight, creeping through the lattice, shone upon its glistening surface, and took out of his pack a leather case, which he opened, disclosing a gorgeous collection of gilt jewellery, rings, brooches, ear-rings, set with garnets, emeralds, and all manner of precious stones; paste, of course, but not on that account looking the less magnificent to Madge's unsophisticated eyes.

"Now, here's an article," said Joshua, with a sly twinkle in his eye—"here's an article as I should like to part with to you. Not as it is a thing you will ever need to buy for yourself, for there's lots of young men, I don't doubt, would be only over-glad to buy one for you. Just fit this here little gold ring on your finger, and see how it looks when it is on. Why, it might have been made on purpose!" he added, as Madge, laughing and protesting against such nonsense, slipped the plain gold circlet on her finger. "It is as pretty a ring as any I ever had," continued Joshua. "There is a posy inside, if you look; '*True and Tried.*' I was up at the Moor Farm afore I come here, and young Mr. Burton he was uncommon took with this here ring. He tried it on hisself. But, losh! it wouldn't go on no further than the first joint of his little finger. And says Mrs. Burton, 'My son will be having custom with you in that line afore long, I daresay, Mr. Duffill. I wouldn't like you to part with that there ring without giving him the refusal.' 'Nonsense, mother!' says he, and he puts it back, and his face coloured up as if he had been a gell. And with

that I knew as he had intentions somewheres, though it wasn't in my department to ax where. You haven't heerd, now, by any chance, who it is that he's thinking of taking up with?"

"Mr. Burton and me are none so intimate that he should tell me them sort of secrets, Mr. Duffill," said Madge, firing up indignantly.

"Hark at her, now!" cried the pedler, soothingly. "I never said you was. I only thought you might have heerd. But I will say he is making an uncommon nice place of yon at the Moor Farm, and putting up cupboards and everything convenient. However, I must be going, or else I have lots of things I could like to show you. Just twist this here ribbin round your hat now," he said, playing his bait again before Madge's eyes. "Why, any lady in the land might wear this here hat now. Not as it would become her any better than what it would you, for complexions are not to be sold over the counter like ribbins and laces. One and tenpence halfpenny a yard. Or say one and eight to you, for I had rather sell it at a loss than for you to go and spoil your Sunday hat with such a piece of trumpery as them St.

Bede's shopkeepers have been putting off upon you."

At that moment the white and tan puppy roused up again, barking a vociferous salute to a second comer who had just appeared and was standing in the doorway. Madge turned a hasty glance upon the little mirror that hung against the wall. It was Mr. Pelham himself who was looking on!

A gay, good-looking young man was the Squire's son and heir, as easy and debonair in his manner as his father was morose and stiff; with a free, roving eye, and a certain good-humoured jauntiness of carriage and appearance, as of one who lived a good deal in the opinion of others.

"Don't let me interrupt business," he said, nodding as he spoke to Madge, and lifting his eyebrows with a careless smile at sight of the gay litter with which the table was overspread. "I see they are affairs of importance you have on hand. I only wanted to speak to your father about the little matter I mentioned to him the other day."

"He is not in at this moment, sir," said

Madge, curtseying and blushing; while Joshua edged aside with a sly glance at the two, and a shrewd calculation as to the increased probability of effecting a sale. "He won't be long before he is back. It is going on for four, and he is always in for his tea."

"Then I may as well wait, as I am here," returned the young man; "and, in the meantime, I can assist, perhaps, in the selection of your ribbons, if it is not presumptuous in me to venture an opinion on such a delicate matter."

"Oh, sir," said Madge, with a coquettish little turn of her head, "I was not going to buy; just Mr. Duffill would show me what he had got in his pack. You may put the ribbon up again, Mr. Duffill," she added, with assumed indifference. "It is very pretty; but five shillings is too much to give for three yards of trimming."

"Over much!" echoed the pedler, holding up the ribbon at arm's length, and festooning it in graceful folds, as he retired a pace or two. "Five shillings over much for that? Why, there isn't a ribbin in St. Bede's to equal it. It

might have been made on purpose to suit a face like yours. It goes against me, it does, indeed, to put it back; and you with a skreed of trumpery like that, as looks no better that a bit of white caliker. However," he continued, beginning to fold up the ribbon with an air of resignation, "I am not one to force my things on customers whether they are willing or not. It is take or leave, that's what it is with me; though I will say this, I am sorry for your own sake, Miss, as you have made up your mind against this here article. It is a chance as don't come every day. *Sich* a ribbin, and *sich* a price!"

"Don't be in a hurry," said Pelham, who had stood chinking the loose money in his pocket while the colloquy was going on. "I think I shall become a purchaser myself. It is just the article to suit me; the very thing I want. Cut me off three yards."

Joshua received the order with a sly twinkle in the corner of his eye, and began to cut off the length of ribbon without delay.

"To be sure, sir. Three yards, sir? One and eightpence a yard. Just five shillings, sir;

though one and tenpence halfpenny is the regular selling price, and cheap at that. But I will charge one and eight, as you heard that mentioned."

The young man threw down a couple of half-crowns upon the table.

"No, no, I want nothing else. You may pack everything up now," he said, with a half impatient gesture of his hand, as the pedler, chuckling over his easy sale, was proceeding to open out fresh stores for his new customer's inspection.

Joshua was a man wise in his generation. Those ferrety, grey eyes of his saw a good deal sometimes, and just now they saw that the young Squire would probably prefer to convey his purchase to the hands for which it was intended, without a third person to assist at the transaction. He tied the strings of his pack with laudable celerity, and, pocketing his gains, heaved his burden round upon his shoulders, set his foot again across the threshold, and left the field clear for the new comer.

Madge's eyes were dropped now, and her heart patting away twice as fast as usual be-

neath her linsey bodice. Of course she knew why Mr. Pelham had bought the ribbon, and what he meant by saying that it was just the thing he wanted. It was because he knew that it was just the thing that she would like to have herself. The Sunday finery, and the admiration of her rival swains, and the envious glances of Elizabeth Welby and the rest of the Marholm girls, were far enough from her thoughts. She was conscious only that Mr. Pelham stood there by the deal table, twisting the ribbon round her hat with his ringed white hand, and chatting and smiling as pleasantly as if she had been a lady born. A great deal more pleasantly than Ralph Burton ever talked, for Ralph never seemed to know quite what to say, or how to say it, when he was setting her home from church, or looking in at the cottage, as he was so fond of doing of an evening, whether he got a welcome when he came or not.

It was Madge who was awkward now. Her small coquetries, easy as they were to practise on her rustic lovers, somewhat failed her in the presence of a well-dressed young gentleman like Mr. Pelham, who belonged to the real quality,

and was unmistakeably separated from her by that indefinable barrier of *caste* which the royalty of beauty itself may not always presume to overpass. The colour deepened, half with pleasure and half with embarrassment, on her tell-tale cheeks, when Mr. Pelham, with a gay compliment on the good looks that needed no such adornment, pressed his purchase on her acceptance.

"You must wear it for my sake, you know," he said, as Madge, conscious of her crimson cheeks, was stumbling out her thanks, vexed beyond measure with herself that, just when she wanted them most, the proper words refused to come. "I shall look out at church to-morrow to see if I am in favour or not. Ah, there is your father yonder, coming through the wood. I think I will go on and meet him, instead of waiting here. Good-bye now. You will wear it, won't you?" he added, smiling upon her with persuasive eyes. "Come! you must say you will; or I shall think I have offended you by my present."

"Oh, sir!" said Madge, floundering into speech at last, "it isn't that I set no store on

the ribbon, only that—that—I'm sure I don't know how it is that I have turned so stupid with my tongue," she broke out, vexed almost to tears.

"Never mind the words, then, if they won't come," said Pelham. "I must take my own thanks, I see, after all." And, without waiting to be forbidden, the young man re-imbursed himself for his outlay by snatching a kiss from Madge's pouting lips. And, before she had recovered sufficiently from her confusion to be certain whether she was most surprised or angered by his gay presumption, he had bidden her good-bye, and was strolling negligently, in sight of the window, down the glade through which her father, with his gun over his shoulder, was returning home.

CHAPTER IX.

DREAMS.

MADGE watched them meet, and then stand for five minutes talking together, the bronzed, stalwart man in his rough keeper's dress, and the younger one so handsome and debonair; toying, as he stood, with the silver-handled cane that he held, and switching off the heads from the tall purple hyacinths that grew within his reach beside the grassy path. Her cheeks were tingling still with the surprise of that stolen kiss. She was trying hard to persuade herself that she was angry, and that, if she had had but a moment to recover her scattered wits, she could have given the young Squire to understand pretty plainly what she thought of his taking such a liberty. If she

was only a keeper's daughter, and he rich enough to fling his half-crowns away as easily as he was switching off the flower-bells from their stalks, was that any reason that he should repay himself after such a fashion?

However, she knew what she would do. She would not wear his ribbon at church to-morrow, and he would see by that that she was offended. And, having arrived at this conclusion, Madge sat down, for Mr. Pelham and her father had turned, and were walking on slowly through the wood, and began to dispose the ribbon round her hat. Just to see how it would look; for she was still strong in her intention of mortifying the donor by not appearing in it to-morrow.

But Madge had not calculated on the force of temptation. Those white and crimson loops and puffs were irresistible, the St. Bede's ribbon so meagre and poor beside them; and her dark eyes and rippling hair were set off so well by the rich full colour, as she tried the hat on before the glass, that her resolution wavered and broke down. After all, she reflected, what was the use of putting off her triumph for

the sake of a bit of nonsense? She would wear the ribbon with the rest of her things; but she would take good care not to give one single glance in the direction of the Priory pew. Mr. Pelham would know then that whatever he might do or say was of no consequence to her.

Her meditations were cut short by the entrance of her father.

"Is the tea fit, Madge?" he asked, as he set down his gun in the corner of the kitchen. "It is past four, a good bit. Mr. Pelham yonder has kept me talking well on to half an hour with him about the pointer pup."

"I declare I had forgot all about the tea!" exclaimed Madge, glancing at the clock in some consternation. "I'll have it ready in a minute. The kettle is boiling, and the things will be set directly. I never gave a thought to the time."

"Ay, ay!" said the keeper, with gruff pleasantry, as he cast his eye on the litter of millinery that strewed the table. "I see how it is. You have had Joshua Duffill here. I met him just a bit since on his way to Marholm, and I thought he had likely been giving you a call.

This here red and white streamer has come out of his pack, or I am in the wrong. There never was a man like Joshua for making the money dance out of other folk's pockets into his own. What has that ribbon cost you now, Madge? A pretty penny, I doubt. It looks to be something extra smart."

"It hasn't cost a deal," answered Madge, evasively. She was kneeling before the fire, toasting a home-made crumpet, so that, if her cheeks happened to be of a somewhat deeper colour than usual, the fact might be accounted for. "But here is the crumpet ready. Don't let it get half cold, father, before you begin of it. Crumpets are worth nothing if they are not eaten just when they are fit."

"Madge, my lass," said the keeper, his rough-cut features spreading into a smile; "you aren't half deep enough! You want to stop my mouth with your hot crumpet, instead of telling me the price of that bit of finery. That's what you want to do."

"You shouldn't be so curious in what don't concern you, father," said Madge, laughing. "As if men knew anything about such things!

You would be sure to say it was over much, if I was to tell you what it cost."

"Well, well," returned the keeper, cutting himself another huge piece of the crumpet. "I know you of old. I had got something I was going to tell *you*, but it may wait a bit now. It will keep, I reckon, like the price of that ribbon. Ralph told me it himself when I was up at the Moor Farm this afternoon."

Madge looked a little curious, but said nothing in reply. If the piece of news was about Ralph Burton, she said to herself, it might wait till her father chose to tell it. She was not going to seem as if she cared to hear anything about him.

"Thou might behave a bit more friendly to Ralph, my lass," said the keeper, presently; and he laid his hand fondly on the girl's shoulder as she knelt at the fire beside him. "He's a likely lad, and thinks a deal of thee. I doubt he's a bit cut up sometimes that thou'rt so tossy with him."

"It is his own fault, then," said Madge, bridling as she spoke. "He should not come worreting after me the way he does. I would

let him alone if he would let me alone. I don't see that there is any call to be so much civiller to Ralph Burton than to other young men. It is not of my asking that he puts himself in my way. And, for the matter of that, he is, maybe, none so easy cut up as you think. He can bide a sharp word now and again as well as most."

"Well, well!" said the keeper, half to himself, and drawing a long breath as he spoke. "Girls will be girls. There is no turning of them into women before their time. I mind your poor mother led me just such another dance afore we were wed. But however! this will be a good job for Ralph, anyhow."

"What will, father?" asked Madge, her bright eyes repeating the question as she turned her face, all glowing between the firelight and the thoughts within. "Has he happened of some luck?"

"His father is going to give up the farm to him. The lease is out, come next Michaelmas, and Ralph has been telling me the old man has made up his mind to give up in favour of him. And a good job it will be for Ralph," added the keeper; "he will be able to see his way now

towards settling. That is what he will be after doing, I reckon, when he has got the farm in his own hands. And a nice home it will be for a wife to go to, whoever she may be."

Madge received the news in silence. She turned her face from her father's observing eye, and looked rather more gravely than before into the fire. It was a piece of intelligence which, she felt instinctively, concerned herself as well as Ralph; and she felt, too, a dull, vague consciousness that it was hardly so welcome as it might have been a month or even ten days ago. She would rather that Ralph Burton and everything belonging to him could have been held in abeyance for awhile, till she had dreamed out the strange, bewildering dream that had been shaping itself of late in the midst of her waking life. It was but a dream, it was true; still the dreaming of it was pleasant beyond all others that she had had before. When it was over, she would think of Ralph again; perhaps give him a friendly word or two, for she had really a lurking kindness towards him; enough to encourage him until she had time to make up her mind about becoming mistress of the

Moor Head Farm. But just now, to have the sober common daylight breaking in upon her golden visions, made her feel as if she could have hated Ralph Burton and his good fortune, and everything belonging to him.

Giles said no more. Madge was a girl of moods and tempers, and perhaps he saw somehow that Ralph's cause would hardly be furthered by urging it upon her now. The big determined fellow, gruff and resolute to the world without, was led like a child by the touch of his daughter's hand. He was fond of her, loving her with a deep, strong tenderness that had grown year by year since the day that he had taken her, a little babe, out of her dead mother's arms. But he was afraid of her, too; and feared as much to bring a cloud upon her brow, or a hint of temper into her voice, as in those long-ago days of wooing he had dreaded giving unconscious matter of offence to his chary and despotic mistress.

He swallowed his tea, gulping down his disappointment too. He had been so hopeful that Madge would have warmed somewhat towards Ralph at the news of his good fortune; and, as

far as he could see, she had taken it just the other way. He could not fathom her. A while ago, he said to himself, she had seemed as if she really had meant to take up with Ralph for a lover, and now this last week or two she had been just as "contrairy." But it was the way with girls, he soothed himself by reflecting. They played with a lover like a cat with a mouse, and seemed as if they took pleasure in tormenting for nothing but the sake of it. Madge would be all right once she was wed, though she was a bit shy and skittish now.

He pushed back his chair when the meal was finished, and took up his hat to go out again.

"It will be late, I doubt, before I am home," he said. "There are some fellows from Dent's Hollow have been setting snares round by the west corner of the Chase. I've had my suspicions a good while, and me and John Kelly are going to watch to-night. You had best not sit up for me. You can lock the house-door inside, and drop me the key out of the window when I come back. It will happen be after twelve first."

"Very well, father," replied Madge, briskly enough.

She was not vexed, at any rate, the keeper thought, by what he had said about behaving better to Ralph.

"Good-bye, my lass," he said, as he went out. "Take care of thyself, and leave the kettle ready by the fire. I'll maybe have a drop of something warm when I come in."

"All right, father!" responded Madge, already bestirring herself to clear the table and put away the tea-things. She was not sorry to have the prospect of a long evening to herself, for there was plenty to do, with her hat still untrimmed. And, if the arrangement of the puffs and loops had been an all-absorbing occupation when she had but the meagre bit of ribbon from the shop at St. Bede's to exercise her taste upon, it may be supposed that Madge looked forward with impatience to the delightful task of adjusting the splendid fabric which was now at her disposal.

There was a good deal to be done before she could fairly begin her work; the poultry

to look up, and the cow to milk, and the water to fetch from the spring; but she sat down at last, and for an hour or two stitched industriously away, her busy fingers feeling no weariness as they flew to and fro over her pleasant task, and her busier fancy weaving round her afresh that strange, bright, bewildering dream.

The sunshine had faded from the cottage floor, and the painted clock had struck out nine shrill impetuous strokes, before her labours were at length triumphantly concluded. The hat was a success—a complete success. It was worth all the time and trouble that she had bestowed upon it, worth even the price that Mr. Pelham had exacted for his purchase. If ever she had looked well before, Madge thought, as she tried it on, turning herself this way and that before the glass, she would look well to-morrow, sitting in the singing-loft full in sight of the Priory pew.

"I wonder," she whispered to herself, when at last she laid her head upon her pillow and closed her drowsy eyes,—"I wonder whether

that quarryman's daughter that the old Squire married was any handsomer than me." And the whisper shaped itself into her dreams.

CHAPTER X.

THE YOUNG HEIR.

THE oak parlour at the Priory House was not by any means a cheerful-looking apartment. It wanted plenty of rich warm crimson hangings to lighten up the sombre old panelled walls, and a thick Turkey carpet to replace the faded piece of antiquity which, for the last quarter of a century, had been growing more and more threadbare and shabby. It wanted a more liberal application of beeswax and rubbing to the dull, dark furniture, and more grace and order in the arrangement of the cumbrous ornaments, bronzes and dragon china and tarnished silver sconces, that stood about here and there. Above all, it wanted a woman's hand to give that indefinable sense of comfort

which is seldom present in any room where neither daughter, wife, nor mother reigns supreme. For at the Priory the feminine element in the household was absent, or represented mainly by Mrs. Mapperly, the housekeeper, a worthy woman in her way, limp and elderly, who thought it useless to waste time and trouble on those details of management which her master seemed but lightly to appreciate.

It was growing dusk, and the shadows were settling in the corners of the room, creeping under the high-backed chairs and heavy, old-fashioned settees and bureaux, and turning into a cavern of darkness the wide-throated chimney by which the Squire sat, smoking his evening pipe, with his glass on the mantel-shelf above him, just within reach of his hand. The fumes of the weed mingled with the fragrance of the jasmine and honeysuckle which the dewy evening air brought in through the open window, and with the odour of a scented cigar which Mr. Pelham was lazily discussing as he lounged upon the broad low sill, one foot tapping a light tattoo upon the floor, the other, cased in

its polished patent leather boot, extended horizontally before him.

There was a shadow on the Squire's face that was not due to the gathering twilight only. His grizzled eyebrows almost met, and he was smoking his pipe, with short, impatient whiffs, that seemed an outlet for some inward irritation. His mood, however, was one in which the young man, to judge by his careless countenance, took no concern. He sat for a quarter of an hour or so, till his cigar was smoked out, and then flung away the end into the garden, lifted the foot that was tapping the floor to a level with the one upon the window-seat, and, stretching both his arms above his head, gave vent to a long resounding yawn.

"It is lively here, at all events," he said, as the echoes died away into the silence that they had disturbed.

"You might have stayed away, then. No one asked you for your company;" responded the Squire, gruffly, looking up for a moment, and then relapsing into his pipe again. "You knew what it was before you came."

"So I did; but you see necessity compelled

me to come," said the young man, airily. "And I fear that necessity will compel me to remain until I can raise the wherewithal to carry me away."

"Then you are likely to remain for some time longer," snarled the Squire from his chair.

"A good while longer. How much longer, now?" inquired Pelham, raising his eyebrows with an air of indifference. "A week?—a month? Say six weeks. I could endure it for that length of time. And then a hundred pounds would set me free."

The Squire made no response. There was silence again for a moment between the two, and then Pelham returned to the matter in hand.

"Suppose we say I remain until next week. A hundred pounds is not an extravagant sum to request, and I assure you the necessity of appealing to your generosity for it is quite as unpleasant to me as the little effort of providing it can possibly be to you."

Still no response. The twilight was thickening; the sound of the old man's slow, sullen whiffs came to Pelham across the silent room.

He began to beat an impatient tattoo with his boot upon the window-seat.

"Consider now, my dear father," he resumed presently, in his most winning tone. "To look at the matter from your own point of view, rather than mine; how much we are sacrificing for the sake of this paltry hundred pounds. It is out of the question for me to go back to town without it; a sheer impossibility. I put the question to you—How am I to follow my profession as a barrister here at Marholm? Is my reputation so established that briefs are likely to come thronging in upon me in this rural solitude? Charming place, delightful society, what there is of it; shooting, fishing, all the *et ceteras* of the usual attractive advertisements; still you must allow it is not precisely the place for a barrister to take chambers in if he has any ambition to succeed. You will see at once then, that the whole of the money expended on my legal education is thrown away. Instead of being in a position to carve my way to fame and fortune, I am compelled to grow mossed and rusty here, wasting my talents, and reduced to the necessity of appealing to your generos-

ity for the price of every cigar I smoke."

Still the Squire puffed on in stolid silence, his impassive face betraying no sign of attention to the arguments of his impecunious heir.

"You cannot fail to perceive," continued the young man, with the most imperturbable composure, "that my expenses while here, trifling as they are, are yet a dead loss to the estate, to say nothing of the income which I might be deriving from my profession if I were in circumstances to follow it with advantage. You must see that it would be infinitely preferable for me to be maintaining myself in a handsome independence, pending the time when in the course of nature the property must lapse altogether into my hands, than that I should be a mere hanger-on at the Priory, without a shilling that I can call my own."

The Squire's face tightened at this allusion to the future, and a shadow of pain for an instant passed across it. He took his pipe from his mouth as if he were about to speak, and then put it back without a word, while a sound, between a groan and a sneer, escaped his lips.

"A hundred pounds," continued Pelham, coolly, "would be spent to incomparably better advantage in setting me free to secure a competence than in planting that piece of land above Burton's farm. You have sunk as much there the last twelve months as would have settled all my difficulties, and yielded a quicker return, no doubt, in the form of fees than you will ever see in timber as the result of your expenditure."

"I tell you what, Pelham!" said his father, roused into speech at last. "I may as well drain my land as let you drain my pockets. The land is my own while I live, to do as I like with, and so is the money; and if I can use it to better advantage than in paying your debts for you, I shall do so."

"Of course, my dear father," returned the young man, still with the same tone of easy assurance. "The question is, can you do so? I would not, for one moment, dream of denying you the privilege which the law allows; still you must perceive, without my pointing it out, that by burying all this money in the land you are only putting it there for me to recover, in

say ten or twenty years' time. It is entirely for my advantage that you are doing it, since you cannot expect to reap the fruits of it yourself. How much more to the purpose it would be then to make over a little of the ready money to me, and let me have the benefit of it at once. I can hardly flatter myself that my presence at the Priory is so desirable as to make you anxious to prolong my stay for your own gratification; and yet, you see, with empty pockets, and no means of replenishing them, the only course that is open to me is to stay on indefinitely."

"Unless indeed," he added, after a pause, "I were to try my fortune in a matrimonial direction. If a man can neither beg, borrow, nor make money for himself, he may as well be a hanger-on of his wife's purse as of his father's. I could live comfortably for the present on Marjory's fortune, and there must have been a good round sum accumulating, too, since my uncle died, that would serve admirably to begin housekeeping upon. She is not exactly my style of girl, I must confess. I never could make much headway with Marjory.

Claudia Braithwaite is worth a dozen of her for dash and go. Still her fortune is a consideration. Besides, the fitness of things points to it. She is my cousin, and I believe, after me, the next heir to the estate, which was left, unless I am under a mistake, to you, and to your heirs. Not that I have any intention of relinquishing my chance of life in her favour; but still the Canon, as one of her guardians, must see that it would be a perfectly natural, and reasonable, and advantageous arrangement to unite her little property with mine, and let us work the estate together."

The Squire took his pipe from his mouth again.

"You would not better yourself," he said, in the half sneering tone that he had used before. "Marjory cannot marry before she is of age, without the consent of both her guardians. If she does, the property is to continue accumulating till she is twenty-five, and then the interest is to be settled for her own use, and the principal to go at her death to her children; or, in case she dies without any, her husband is not to touch a penny of it. It is a curious provision, but I

suppose Percival had his reasons for making it."

"Whew! That alters the case," said Pelham, in a voice which showed that he was somewhat taken aback by the disclosure. "Still it does not follow that the case is hopeless, though it seems there are two fortresses to win instead of one, and it will be precious hard, I expect, to bring the Canon to surrender, especially to a briefless young barrister like me. Of course you would give your consent, as the other guardian; and as to Marjory, she might be brought to see the advantage of the proposal, especially as there is no more favoured swain in the way, so far as I know, to keep the course of true love from running smooth. As to the dear old aunt, I may count on her with certainty for an ally."

"The Canon will never give his consent to Marjory's marriage with you," said the Squire, doggedly. "You may trust him not to let such a scapegrace have the spending of her fortune, while he is alive to prevent it. Marjory might do it. Girls can be fooled into anything by a man who knows how to set about it; but the Canon knows you too well."

"One might reform," replied the young man, airily, "if there were a sufficiently strong motive for doing so; as in this case, of course, there would be. At all events, for two or three years, until the young lady were safely married and of age; and after that it would not signify. I believe I shall think seriously of going in for it," he added, after a prolonged contemplation of the tip of his enamelled boot. "'Nothing venture, nothing have;' which is precisely my case at present. For where my next five pounds are to come from, Heaven knows; I don't!"

The Squire made no response. Again for awhile there was silence between the two. The twilight had fallen deeper, the gloomy old parlour was full of dusky shadows now; only at the open window, where Pelham sat, there was light enough to show his handsome profile, and crisp light hair, and carefully got-up attire.

He started at last from his lounging posture, and stood upright in the room.

"I tell you what," he began, in a steady, set, business-like tone, which contrasted strangely with the half bantering manner he had hitherto assumed, "there may as well be no nonsense

between us. We cannot go on as we are doing now, that is certain. If you will give me down the money that I must have to get myself clear with, I will give you my word that I will go back to town and work like a horse for the next three months; that is, if I can get anything to do. Anyhow, I will stick to my chambers for that length of time, retrieve my character to any extent you like, go to church, and give up billiards, and all the rest of it. Then, when the shooting begins, I will come back to Marholm, and regularly go in for the girl. There is no stipulation, I suppose, in my uncle's will, that she should wait till she is one and twenty before she marries, provided both guardians give their consent. If you back me up well, I will undertake to secure her; and if the three of us together cannot manage to bring the Canon to terms, I can only say there will be a dead loss of seven hundred a year, through either your fault or hers, for it will not be mine."

The Squire smoked on in stubborn taciturnity; but Pelham, peering keenly through the gloom, saw, by the bend in the grizzled brows, that his

arguments had told at last, and promptly followed up his advantage.

"Give me your hand upon it, now," he said, after pausing for a moment, that his proposal might have time to take effect. "We may as well strike the bargain at once. The game is worth the candle. You risk your hundred pounds down. I engage, from this day forward, to throw over Claudia Braithwaite, and to be at all the pains necessary to commend myself to Marjory and her uncle; and a pretty tough piece of business, too, I expect to find it. I shall have considerably the heaviest end of the log to carry. You must see that. I should not wonder but I get into such a confirmed habit of good behaviour in a year or two that I shall turn out quite an exemplary young man, after all; save money out of her income, and double the value of the estate before I die."

The Squire looked up with a mixture of grasping and irresolution on his hard grey face.

"If your word were worth anything," he said, with a distrustful sneer, "one might take it. You have given me it before."

"But, my dear sir," said Pelham, relapsing

into his former tone of light indifference, "is it so dusk at this moment that you are unable to perceive that my word and my interests are in the present case identical? I engage to make seven hundred a year by marriage, and you may rely upon it that I shall do my utmost to fulfil my part of the contract. There is not the slightest connection between the case in hand and your past experience of my promises, which, I allow, the pressure of circumstances has sometimes prevented me from fulfilling. You have incomparably the smallest risk," continued the young man, ignoring an interjectional growl which the Squire here threw in. "A hundred pounds, or two hundred even, if I fail, involves nothing more than leaving some corner of scrubby moorland undrained. Whereas, if the thing comes to nothing, which is a contingency, however, that I do not in the least look forward to, I have six months, or more, at the very least, of hard work and proprieties, and dull country life, and humdrum courting, thrown away. You must see that you have the best of it in any case. However, if you are not disposed to agree, Claudia Braithwaite will not be hard,

I daresay, to win. I could marry her on my prospects, and we could live on her five thousand pounds until something better turned up. It would be an improvement, at any rate, on starving here at home."

That last clause was skilfully put in. The Squire's brow darkened; he laid down his pipe, and turned himself stiffly round on his great elbow chair, so as to face his son.

"You can go back to town next week," he said, in a dry, forced voice. "And look here, Pelham, if you fail me again this time, and bring home any more debts for me to pay, you shall never see money of mine again. You can please yourself when you have Marjory's purse to help yourself out of—if you are lucky enough to win her, that is to say; but this is the last hundred beyond your regular allowance that I shall ever give you. That is all I have to say. As to backing you up with the Canon, that must wait until there is some good to say of you that will sound like truth."

"Of course!" replied the young man, modulating his voice so as not to betray too much the satisfaction he felt at the turn affairs had

taken. "And I am glad you see with me that the best possible arrangement we can make will be to proceed at once to provide me with a character that will bear inspection. If my good conduct is judiciously rehearsed during my absence, which I shall rely on you to do, it will pave the way considerably to the operations which I shall be ready to commence immediately on my return. That will be in September. Say the wooing occupies three months. We can surely overcome the uncle's scruples so as to have matters settled by Christmas; and after that there is no reason in the world why we should not be married in the spring; and then I am off your hands at once, and a fortune of twenty thousand pounds brought into the family. I only wish my mother had brought in half as much! I should not have been the penniless dog I am."

"Your mother brought you into the family, and that is enough for you," growled the Squire, turning to his pipe again.

"And her good looks too," returned Pelham, lifting his eyebrows with a careless smile. "I am indebted to her for them, at all events, and

I trust they will stand me in as much stead with my lady love, as my good resolutions will favour my cause with the Canon. I intend to carry them out, I assure you; at least, I intend to seem to carry them out, which comes to the same thing, so far as Marjory is concerned. And if you and I can manage to pull comfortably together, and I succeed with her, I do not see why I should not eventually turn out everything that you could wish me to become. Upon my word and honour, the only reason for my ever going wrong has been that something or other has come in my way which I could not have without going wrong to get it. Now, on the contrary, the temptation comes in such a form that I must go right in order to secure what I wish to obtain. *Voilà la différence!* However, now that we have come to an understanding, I think, if you will excuse my leaving you, I will smoke my other cigar out of doors. I must turn matters over a little in my mind, and get accustomed to the change in my prospects."

He strode across the window-sill as he spoke, and stepped out into the garden. The Squire from his chair watched him sauntering down the

weedy walks, till the young man's figure was lost in the dusk among the trees. Then he shook the ashes from his pipe and heaved a heavy sigh.

"Ay, ay," he muttered to himself. "This is the end of it all. For five-and-twenty years I have eaten the bread of carefulness; I have laboured and saved—ay, and sinned and suffered too, that the estate might be clear against the time when the lad came into it, and already he begins to count the years that he is being kept out of it by me. My old grey nag would miss me more than my only son!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

SUNDAY was the great day of the week at Marholm, as, indeed, in most country villages it is. Christmas Day and the "Feast" were, to be sure, the grand annual epochs; but what these were to the year, Sunday was to the week—a day to be looked forward to and enjoyed; when, instead of eating his bread and cold bacon under the shadow of a hedge, a man might sit down, clean-washed and comfortable, to a smoking hot dinner at home—a day that stood out above all the rest to the farming lads and servant girls, who got an hour or two then, when they could dress up in their best, and court or be courted, as the case might be. Half the matches in Marholm were made up on Sun-

days, coming home from evening church, or in those long strolls in the fields and lanes, when the rustic swain, conscious of his resplendent neck-tie and brand-new coat, felt that the propitious hour for urging his suit had come.

There were not many in Marholm who, if they could help it, missed going to morning church on Sunday; and a goodly sight it was, when the bells were ringing for service, to see the people flocking in all directions towards the weather-beaten fane. From every corner of the parish they came, the farmers with their wives upon their arms, and two or three rosy-faced children in the rear, the village lads and lasses in their Sunday best, little urchins toddling along holding by their mothers' gowns, and old men leaning on their staffs, making their slow way across the green. Even Jacob Jessop, the patriarch of the village, who was ninety-one last birthday, and as deaf as a post, used on sunshiny mornings to totter out, with the help of a couple of stout staffs, and take his accustomed place on the bench before the pulpit, where he could see the Canon's face, and feel, as he expressed it, that "summut

good was going on," though trumpets would not have made him hear.

It would be too much, perhaps, to suppose that everyone went to church solely for the sake of worship. Use and wont, the pleasure of seeing and being seen, the five minutes' talk in the porch before and after service, were potent attractions with many, notably so with our Madge, who, on the morning after the visits of Joshua Duffill and the young Squire, would willingly have walked ten miles instead of two, rather than have been absent from her place in the singing-loft.

"Why, Madge, my lass! what has come to thee?" exclaimed Giles, when Madge, after repeated calls from the bottom of the stairs, appeared at last in full trim, with her Prayer-book and a clean folded pocket-handkerchief in her hand. "Thou looks like a fresh-pulled posy."

Madge smiled at the compliment to her appearance.

"New things ought to look better than old ones," she said, smoothing down a refractory frill. "I have worn my last year's gown while

I thought shame to put it on again, and everybody else at church in their summer things. It was time to make a change."

"Well, thou's done it to some purpose at last," said Giles, with a look of fatherly pride and complacency at the pretty sight before him. "Folks might take thee for a lady, if it wasn't for seeing me at thy side. But it is time we were off; it is half after ten by the clock."

"I am ready, all but a flower for my gown. I can get it in a minute," answered Madge, going to the door, where a monthly rose, covered with a profusion of pale pink blossoms, was trained over the porch.

The keeper came out, too, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket. He had washed and shaved, and, in a general way, "cleaned himself," at a considerable expense of time and trouble, before starting for church. He wore his Sunday coat, and a carefully brushed hat; and, it must be confessed, did not look half so picturesque as in the worn velveteen suit and moleskin cap in which he appeared on week days.

"I wish one of those deep-red *noisettes* had

been out," said Madge, as she gathered the rosiest cluster she could find, and fastened it with a coquettish grace in the bosom of her dress. "It would have gone a deal better with this ribbon. But there is no hurrying them; they'll flower when they have a mind to, and not before."

"Ay, ay!" said the keeper. "They are a match for you girls in that. I might have called at the bottom of them stairs till church had gone in, and it would have been all to no use, till you had got your frills and ribbons to your mind. We must step out now, or we shall be late."

"No fears of that. There is plenty of time," said Madge. "The bells have only just this moment put in. How fair we can hear them! The wind must bring the sound right over here."

"It is full west," said Giles. "We shall be having warm weather if it keeps in that quarter. It will bring the hay on finely. Ralph Burton was saying yesterday theirs was coming on uncommon."

Madge pursed her lips at this mention of

Ralph, and made no reply. She wished her father was not so fond of bringing in his name at every turn. It was Ralph Burton here, and Ralph Burton there, till she was tired of hearing it. Her thoughts, however, as she walked on briskly by her father's side, soon slipped into another channel. The keeper was not a man much given to discourse, and Madge had ample leisure during their walk through the wood, to rehearse the little drama in which she was about to take her part. She had gone through it several times before, with a flutter of expectation akin to that of some Belgravian beauty who is contemplating an appearance at Court, and knows her triumph certain. Ambition, as well as vanity, was stirring now within her. She had not yet overcome her pique at the young Squire's trespass on the previous afternoon, but she was beginning to regard it with more indulgence than indignation; and the wish to produce an impression upon him this morning was more vividly present with her than the thought of the sensation which, in her new summer costume, she would create among her rustic swains and the village belles.

Her cogitations were brought to a conclusion by their arrival at the gate leading out of the Chase into the village; and close by the gate, as luck would have it, were old Mr. and Mrs. Burton, and Ralph with a bunch of flowers in his hand, coming past on their way to church. They stopped to say good morning, and then the party moved on towards the church in company. The old couple went arm in arm together, and the keeper walked on beside them, talking of the weather and the crops and the fine prospect for the hay. There was only room for three to walk together on the path, so that Madge was obliged to fall behind, and, as a necessary consequence, to accept the escort of Ralph, who on his part was only too thankful for the chance that gave him five minutes beside her.

"Madge," he began, "I am main glad we happened of one another before church. I got these here begonias last night for you from the gardener at the Court. They are real beauties, and just the colour of your gown. Will you have them?"

"Thank you, Mr. Burton," said Madge, con-

descendingly. "I don't know but what I will. They will match the things I have on better than these roses."

Madge had not failed to note Ralph's look of admiration when he saw her at the gate of the Chase, and the silent compliment and the proof of her success which it implied had softened her into a momentary graciousness. Besides, these coral clusters were really too beautiful to be refused. She could not have chosen more to her mind if she had gone through Lord Danvers' hothouses and selected for herself. And then hothouse flowers had a look about them that common garden-flowers had not. There was a flavour of gentility about Ralph's delicate exotics which made her spray of roses quite paltry in comparison. So Madge, whose thoughts had flashed at once to their effect in Mr. Pelham's eyes, decided to gratify her rustic lover by her acceptance of his offering.

Ralph's face brightened as Madge took the flowers from his hand. It was almost more than he had dared to hope, though he had walked four miles and back again the night

before for the sake of having something worthy to present.

"Let me hold your book for you," he said. "You can't fix them rightly with one hand."

Madge gave it to him, and with it the discarded roses which she had taken from her bosom. Elizabeth Welby had just come in sight, and Mark Staniland was looking across from the other side of the green, and Madge was not proof against the satisfaction of parading Ralph's allegiance. Otherwise she might probably have declined his offer, and have waited to adjust her flowers until she was in church.

But of this Ralph was happily unconscious. His heart was trembling with joy at these unwonted favours.

"You'll let me keep these?" he begged, when she was ready to take back her properties.

"What, the roses?" said Madge, still aware of Mark's eye upon them. "Yes, you can have them, for anything I care. They are not much to look at after these flowers of yours; but they

are sweet. Those little pale roses are as sweet as any we have."

"Any rose would be sweet that you had worn," said Ralph, in a low voice, as he put the rose into his button-hole, his heart fluttering like a girl's at his own presumption.

But Madge gave her head a disdainful turn.

"I thought you had found out before now, Mr. Burton," she said, "that I am not one of them that are fond of fine speeches. If you can't as much as give me two or three flowers without tying them up with nonsense like that, you may as well let it alone."

Ralph took his rebuff in silence. The thrill at his heart stiffened into pain. They had reached the church porch now, where a little group of the village folk stood chatting and exchanging greetings, as the custom was at Marholm, for the five or ten minutes before service. Old Mr. and Mrs. Burton passed straight forward into the church. The keeper stopped behind to speak to one of the farmers who had just come up. Ralph would fain have lingered a moment for the chance of a more friendly word; but Madge had turned

from him, and was distributing her nods and smiles to one and another of her acquaintance, with a liberality that made her sharp speech echo all the more sharply in his ears. Do what he would, there was no keeping her on good terms with him for five minutes together. He almost thought that the more he strove, the harder she was to please. However, she was wearing his flowers in her bosom now. It was something to know that he had not walked the four miles to the Court and back to no purpose the night before. And, with such small comfort as the reflection could impart, Ralph took off his hat, and smoothed down his hair, and followed his father and mother up the aisle to the high-backed pew at the further end of the church, whence a view of the singing-loft was to be had, and where he might feed his trouble or forget it by furtive glances at the cause of all his pain.

CHAPTER XII.

MORNING CHURCH.

MADGE, in the meantime, after loitering for a moment at the porch, had climbed the narrow winding stair that led up into the singing-loft, and was settling herself down, and fluttering out her plumes, in the front seat of the low gallery, where she, with Miriam Wray and the rest of the choir, sat; the girls on the left and the men on the right.

It was a fine old church, with stained windows in the chancel and down the aisles; with much black oak carving on the pulpit and above the altar, and on the bosses of the groined roof; with quaint effigies of mediæval knights lying with clasped hands and upturned faces, peacefully enough, upon their marble

couches. There were many monuments, also, upon the walls; some of marble, some of brass, let into the stone itself, and inscribed with obsolete lettering which no one in the parish, except the "quality," who had more learning than common folk, had ever been able to decipher. The pews were of black oak, some of them a good deal worm-eaten and decayed. At the upper end of the church, where the well-to-do farmers, and the inhabitants of the tall grey houses sat, they were lined with faded green baize, fastened on with innumerable brass-headed nails; and close upon the chancel were those belonging to the Rectory, the Court, and the Priory House; wherein the "quality," curtained round, and defended from the vulgar gaze, might worship at their ease. "Hiding their light under a bushel," as little Miss Trim, the village dressmaker and milliner, who always took the pattern of the other ladies' new bonnets and mantles the first Sunday that they wore them at church, was wont to say.

From the singing-loft, however, there was a full view over even the close-drawn curtains into these sanctums of gentility. Not that it signi-

fied much in a general way, for the Court pew had been empty since the family went abroad, and as to old Mr. Elphinstone, who came pretty regularly to church every Sunday morning, there was nothing in him to make the prospect into the Priory pew any great advantage. It had made all the difference, however, since Mr. Pelham had been at home. His roving eye, as it wandered round the church, had found out that there was a face in the singing-loft worth studying; and he took the opportunity of doing it so often that Madge became quite aware of the flattering frequency with which his glances were directed towards the place she occupied.

She could see into the Priory pew quite well without seeming to look, and a single glance, as she was settling herself in her place, and laying her book open upon the desk, showed her that Mr. Pelham was there, seated, too, on that narrow, high seat against the wall, whence he could look straight up towards the loft. That was enough for Madge. He was there, and he chose to make himself uncomfortable for the sake of a sight of her. She looked down the

church, and felt that she would bear comparison with anyone there; except, perhaps, Miss Elphinstone, who, even to Madge's thinking, was beautiful as any picture, with her soft, sweet eyes, and her grey velvet hat, with its long, drooping plume, and that lovely lilac dress. As to those washed-out Miss Martendales, Madge counted them as nothing, in spite of their laces and lavender silks and delicate gloves. And Miss Claudia Braithwaite, though she looked well, no doubt, in that straw-coloured muslin, and those splendid China-roses in her bonnet, yet had a poor complexion, very poor; and, if it were not for her stylish dress, could hardly be considered handsome. Among the farmers' daughters, and the Marholm girls, there was no one, Madge felt, who could have any pretensions to rival either her good looks or her becoming dress. For it was becoming, there was no doubt about that; though it was simple enough to be quite in accordance with her station. Madge had an instinct of good taste, which kept her from foolishly aping the appearance of those above her; and yet her fine *tournure*, and lithe, elastic figure, made her straw hat

and printed calico seem quite a charming costume.

How she wished that she dare steal a single glance towards the Priory pew, to assure herself of its effect. But she had made up her mind, and she was determined to adhere to her resolution. Mr. Pelham must be made to understand that he had offended her, and this was the only way open to her to do it. She kept her eyes studiously averted, till at last, when the sermon was about half way over, she could resist no longer, and, though not without sundry misgivings, lifted her head and looked furtively over the green curtains to where the young Squire sat.

She need not have been afraid. He was not looking at her, or, indeed, at anything at all. His eyes were closed, his head inclined a little forward; apparently he had been overcome by drowsiness, and was availing himself of the interval between the Canon's text and the benediction, to indulge in a little uncomfortable slumber.

What a gay, handsome face it was! Madge thought; with its beautifully-brushed hair, and

curled moustache, and the blue silk cravat knotted carelessly round his throat. She could not help contrasting it with Ralph Burton's broad, honest visage, and thinking what a difference there was between a real gentleman like Mr. Pelham, and a man who had to be working all day long like Ralph, earning a living for himself, instead of lounging gracefully, well-dressed and idle, and with unlimited half-crowns in his pocket.

She was musing thus when suddenly Mr. Pelham opened his eyes, and, before she could turn away her own, had caught her gaze upon him. Madge was provoked beyond measure. She felt the colour mount into her cheeks as just the least appearance of a smile curled the corners of his mouth. She might look towards the pulpit now, Mr. Pelham would know that it was all pretence, and that she was colouring up because she had been caught watching his face while he was asleep. It was not long, however, that she had to endure her discomfiture. The Canon never wearied his hearers by the length of his sermons, and in ten minutes' time the congregation was dispersing, and

Madge, glad to make her escape, found herself in the church porch again. Mark Staniland was standing in the sunshine outside, talking to her father, who was waiting for her to come down from the singing-loft. Mrs. Boynton, too, was there, well-dressed and substantial, in a handsome silk gown and coloured shawl, and with a China-rose, exactly like Miss Claudia Braithwaite's, in her bonnet.

"Bless me, Madge," she exclaimed, as soon as the girl was near enough to shake hands, "how well you do look, to be sure! That is an uncommon pretty print you have got on, and sets so smart on you, too. It isn't Jane Collop's making, surely?"

"Jane Collop's!" said Madge, her complacency reviving somewhat under Mrs. Boynton's compliments. "I should think not. I would not have my things spoiled by her. I put every stitch in this myself, and cut it out and everything."

"And trimmed your hat, too, I'll be bound?" said the landlady, as she turned and walked down the churchyard path with Madge. "I know the ribbon. It came out of Joshua Duf-

fill's pack. He showed me the piece yesterday, and a nice price he wanted for it. Two and sixpence a yard. Your hat has cost you a pretty penny, if you gave him that for it, and he would not put it in for a farthing less."

"I had it given to me," Madge was on the point of saying; but recollected herself in time to keep her own counsel, though at the risk of being thought extravagant by the prudent dame.

"It is the prettiest hat in all Marholm, I will say that," pursued Mrs. Boynton, after another survey. "And suits you so well, too. I never did know anyone to beat you, Madge, for knowing what looked best on them. No wonder so many pair of eyes finds their way to the singing-loft."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Boynton," said Madge, well pleased, nevertheless, at the landlady's speech. The more so because she knew that not a word of what was said would be lost on Mark, who was coming on with her father close behind them. "As if there was nobody sat up in the singing-loft but me."

"Then it was Elizabeth Welby, maybe, as

Mr. Ralph Burton and Mr. Staniland here were so taken up with?" said the landlady, nodding her head over her shoulder towards Mark. "I doubt they neither of them heard a deal of the sermon, if the truth was told."

"And I doubt, Mrs. Boynton, if your eyes had so much to do up and down the church this morning, it was not a deal you gave your ears to do either," retorted Mark, trying to blunt the edge of the landlady's innuendo by turning it against herself.

A shrewd, good-humoured lad was Mark Staniland. "Long Mark," they called him in the village, on account of his height. He was a good head taller than the keeper, as they walked side by side, and Giles himself was a well-built man. Madge was rather proud of counting Mark Staniland among her admirers. He was only son to the elder Mark Staniland, the Marholm wheelwright; and there would be a snug little business for him to come into one of these days. Perhaps not so very far away either, for old Mark had a comfortable sum laid up in the bank at St. Bede's, and had said more than once, as he sat among his cronies in the

sanded parlour of the "Danvers' Arms," that he thought he had worked long enough, and that it was time for younger shoulders to take the burden on themselves.

Mrs. Boynton laughed at Mark's rejoinder.

"They would be clever that would catch you up, Mr. Mark," she said. "But wait a bit, and you'll find somebody that will do it for you, or I'm mistaken. There's many a young man gets caught by a pair of bright eyes before he knows where he is, or what it is that has come to him. What do you say, Madge?"

"I say that I know nothing about it," said Madge, turning herself coquettishly from the landlady's meaning look. "And I hope it will be a long time before Mr. Mark gets into trouble of that sort."

"If he has not got into it already," returned the incorrigible landlady. "But I must be saying good morning. It would take me too long, or I would go round with you by the green; but I must be back to see about putting down Mr. Beverley's dinner. There is no trusting girls to do a thing as it had ought to be done, if your back is turned. By the way, you

had him to supper the night he came to Marholm. To think of that now! And I never heard a word of it while this morning. But you might have the Queen to supper away yonder in the Chase, and nobody would be the wiser for it. I can't think, for my part, how you do to live at such a lonesome spot. I should be frightened to death, if it was me, of being robbed and murdered in my bed some dark night; and not a house within a mile of you."

"The thieves would get a warmer welcome, maybe, than they would think for, if they were to come to our place," said the keeper, his grim brows tightening a little. "Our Madge can fire a gun as well as I can, and take good aim, too, if need were. I'll warrant a man would be more like to carry away a charge or two of shot with him than aught else, if he was to come prowling about our place, for as lone as it is."

"To think of that, now!" cried Mrs. Boynton. "But I never did know your equal, Madge; for you can put your hand to anything. How you come by it I can't imagine, and your poor mother in her grave since ever you were

born; and it stands to reason your father didn't teach you cooking and dressmaking, as well as to handle a gun. It's gifts; that's what it is."

"Ay, you've hit it there, Mrs. Boynton," put in Mark, anxious to throw in a compliment himself. "She had a fairy godmother, belike; and that's how she has come in for so much more than other folk."

"I tell you what, I think you'll turn her head between you," said Giles, as they all drew up beside the village well, where the road branched off to the Chase. "Come, Madge."

Mrs. Boynton shook hands, and went her way. Mark Staniland would fain have gone round the green with the keeper and his daughter, for the sake of five minutes longer with Madge; but she said Good-bye so decidedly that there was nothing for it but to submit.

"Brown, is that you? I want a word with you," said a voice behind them, just as Giles and Madge had reached the gate leading into the Chase.

The keeper turned, and touched his hat. Madge felt her heart fluttering like a startled

bird. It was Mr. Pelham himself who was close behind them.

"I just wanted to say to you that I am going away for a couple of months or so; and, if you should find a customer for the dog at your own price, you had better let it go. That is all."

"Very good, sir," replied the keeper, touching his hat again as he passed through the gate into the Chase. Madge was following him; but, as ill luck would have it, a rusty nail at the bottom of the gate-post caught the hem of her dress, and obliged her to turn and disentangle it.

The young Squire stooped, too, for an instant, and whispered in her ear.

"I must come and say Good-bye before I go. You have forgiven me, I see."

Madge dragged herself free from the detaining nail, and, without a word or even a look of reply, rushed after her father, while Mr. Pelham, with his hands in his pockets, turned and sauntered carelessly away.

"He is worth a dozen of the old Squire, is Mr. Pelham," said Giles, as Madge rejoined him. "So free and pleasant spoken. He favours his

mother a deal more than what he does his father. She had just that taking way with her, though she wasn't a lady born."

"She was a quarryman's daughter, wasn't she?" said Madge, turning aside to hide her still crimson cheeks.

"Ay; lived over at a place they call Langley Pyke, the other side of Roedale. They say he saw her one day when he was out shooting, and fell in love with her right away; and he had her sent to school for a year, and then married her, and took her with him into foreign parts, where there was nobody would know who or what she had been."

"I have heard Mrs. Boynton talk of her," said Madge. "It was for her looks he married her, she said. She might have been a princess, she was so handsome."

"Ay; she was handsome enough for anything. I recklect seeing her at church the day Mr. Pelham was christened. What a picture she was, to be sure, as she came up the aisle to the Priory pew! All in sky-blue silk and white, tall and straight and fair, and her hair and eyes just like Mr. Pelham's, and carried herself as if

she had been a lady all her life, though she wasn't a bit stiff or set up, either."

"And she was just a quarryman's daughter?" said Madge, musingly.

"Ay; nothing no more than that. There are some of her folks living still at Langley Pyke, but the Squire has never had ought to do with them. He made her cast off all her kith and kin when she married him."

Madge made no reply, and asked no more questions. The two went on silently together till they reached the cottage, and then she went straight upstairs to her attic, and took a long and leisurely survey of herself in the little mirror that stood on the painted chest of drawers before the window.

She had looked many times before, for pure pleasure in her own good looks; such pleasure as a girl has a right to feel who sees before her a face as handsome as Madge saw reflected now in the little square of looking-glass. No doubt there had been mingled with the pleasure a little perversity sometimes as well. It is so hard to possess power of any kind without being tempted at times to make an arbitrary

use of it; and, of all tokens of dominion, the sceptre which beauty puts into a woman's hands is, perhaps, the most frequently wielded with a certain careless despotism. Let us own that Madge had dispensed her favours with occasional caprice, and even coquetry. Shall we quarrel with the sweet, wild rose because of the little prickly thorn that guards its vagrant loveliness?

It was not a girl's natural vanity, however, neither pleasure in herself, nor pride in her beauty's power, that moved her now, as she leaned her rounded arms upon the dimity cover of the chest of drawers that served her for a toilet-table, and questioned the little looking-glass with such unwonted earnestness. A vague restlessness was stirring within her, a fluttering ambition that scarcely dared as yet to try its unfledged wings.

Phœbe Gale had been handsome, too, and she had become Lady of the Priory!

Madge gazed intently at the vision in the glass. It had been herself that she had looked at uncounted times before, her own handsome, glowing self, Madge Brown, the acknowledged

belle of Marholm. Now it was her beauty at which she gazed with curious intentness; her beauty as a thing apart from herself, a possession that had suddenly acquired a new, strange value in her eyes. She was feeling as one might feel who had discovered that, instead of a five-pound note, he owned one that was worth a thousand pounds.

—A quarryman's daughter, and the old Squire had married her for her beauty; just for her beauty!

Madge gazed at the handsome face before her, and her thoughts ventured on their flight. "I don't believe," she murmured to herself, "but what I have as good a chance as ever Phœbe Gale had."

Then she started up, all aglow at her own presumption, and, hastily slipping off her church-going dress, ran downstairs to set the table, and to bring out of the larder the Sunday meal which had been awaiting their return.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACKBIRD'S SONG.

THE cluster-roses that climbed over the porch, and covered the white-washed front of the keeper's cottage, were glowing in the low sunset light, and, from the flower-plot beneath the windows, the clove-pinks and gilliflowers and mignonette were breathing forth all manner of pleasant perfume into the warm, soft evening air. High overhead a blackbird, perched on the topmost bough of one of the great beech-trees that made the glory of the Chase, was singing lustily to his mate, as she brooded over her callow nestlings in the green gloom below. The clear, glad notes came streaming down, a flood of liquid melody; such roulades and *fiorituras*, such trills and shakes at the very

top of the scale, as would have brought down showers of bouquets and thunders of applause, if heard from the lips of some Italian *prima donna* on the stage of Covent Garden theatre.

There were no jewelled hands, however, in Marholm Chase to fling their perfumed flatteries away, and only a small and homely audience to be charmed by those wild and witching notes. But our little warbler sang for love and happiness alone, and not at all for praise. Enough for him if a quicker thrill of pleasure stirred the mother bird below, as she ruffled her downy feathers over the fledglings that lay covered by her patient breast, and listened to the gush of song with which her mate beguiled the sweet weariness of the task that Love and Nature had assigned her. For the rest, what cared he? The magic of the sunset hour possessed him; and wilder and sweeter his song rang out, till all the hushed and scented air seemed pierced with his own ecstasy of joy, and the very breezes wandering through the woodland stayed themselves to listen.

Madge was listening, too, as she sat on the bench in the rose-wreathed cottage porch, with

a bowl of peas upon her lap, which she was shelling for her father's supper. Fine marrow-fats they were, plump and juicy, the first gathering of the season. With a rasher or two of bacon, and a glass of good ale, and that fine relish which the keen upland air never failed to supply, no king need wish for a daintier dish to be set before him.

Giles himself sat within the cottage, out of sight, but not out of hearing, busy with a gun which he had taken to pieces to clean, and waiting with a certain zest of expectation for the supper which was in course of preparation for him. For Madge, besides the good looks with which nature had so liberally endowed her, was blessed also with that invaluable feminine instinct, the love of ministering to the comforts of those about her. Mrs. Boynton herself had not a finer faculty in that direction, nor a more complacent pride in her power of successful catering, especially in the culinary line. The first gathering of these green marrow-fats had been, as Caleb's strawberries had been to him, one of the events of the season with Madge. She had sown them herself in the sunny,

showery April weather, had trained and tended them and watched their progress, from the first tiny leaflet that pushed up greenly out of the earth till now that the pods hung firm and full enough to warrant her in treating her father to a feast. She had gathered them liberally. Madge never did things by halves. There would be a famous up-heaped dish, enough for the most excellent appetite to spend itself upon; and the girl nimbly shelled away, the housewifely element in her in full contented play.

Yet, busy as she seemed, there was a hint of hidden restlessness about her which a nice observer might detect. Evidently she was not altogether absorbed in her homely occupation. Sometimes she would cease from it for a moment and gaze absently down the glade that stretched before her; then she would resume her task more busily; then cease again, and lift her head to listen to the blackbird which all the time sang loud and clear from the beech-tree top.

"Hark at him, father!" she cried presently, raising her voice a little so as to reach well within the kitchen. "Why, he sings like all

the church choir put together. It is a pity but we could have had him for the top notes of the Easter anthem, that we none of us scarce could reach; though me and Miriam Wray can get up a pretty good height, too, when we are on the stretch. But that blackbird beats us all. He has been at it like that for a good half hour, and he shows no signs of giving over yet."

Giles laid down his gun, and listened for a moment through the open lattice.

"He has a nest somewhere in among the branches, I'll be bound," he said.

"I know he has," answered Madge from the porch. "He has sat and sung on that tree-top just about this time of an evening for ever so long. I always know it is getting on for supper time when he begins to tune up; and it seems as if his note got sweeter and sweeter every day. It was nothing like this when he first began."

"Ay, ay," said the keeper, while a slow smile broadened over his rough-cut visage. "That's just where it is. He is made out of the right sort of stuff, is that little chap, same sort as the husband that I hope you'll have the luck

to light on, Madge, when it comes to choosing. He's not one of them that show their best while they are sweethearting; and then, when courting days are over, and there's a family to do for, leave their Missis to tew along by herself, and never give another thought to pleasing her. Yon blackbird has saved his best songs for his mate against the time when she'd want them most."

"There's a deal of young men might take pattern by him then," cried Madge, saucily. "They are as pleasant and as soft-spoken as you like while they have everything to get, and when they've got it there's an end to it all. They think it's the wife's turn then to please them, and hard work it is, too. They are well enough, some of them, before they are wed; but there is nothing spoils a man, Mrs. Boynton says, like marrying him."

"Nay, lass," returned the keeper, "thou'rt in the wrong there, and Mrs. Boynton too. It makes a man, instead of marring him, if he's of the right sort to begin with. I know it by myself," he went on, and his voice grew tender as he spoke. "If ever a young

man loved a maid, I loved thy mother when I was a-courting her, though I was but a poor hand at saying of it to her face, and many's the time she made as if she wouldn't believe me, or set no store by it if she did. But that love was as naught to what I had for her when she was my wife. She was like my own life to me then. Ay, and more than that! For if it hadn't been for thee, Madge, that was a babe of a day old when she went from me, I would have laid me down on her grave and died."

Madge said nothing in reply. The tide of passionate remembrance that stirred her father's voice had stilled the careless ripple of her own. It was not often that Giles spoke thus. He was a man of a silent habit mostly, both at home and abroad, and the springs of feeling in him lay so deep that it was but rarely they reached the surface of his thoughts to overflow in speech. But just now the father's heart was full of a strange yearning over his child. Day and night he was busying himself in anxious dreams about her future lot. For it had been plain enough for some time now that Ralph Burton was desperately in love with her; and there

was no young man in all the parish, Giles considered, who would be so likely to make a good husband for the girl.

Of course, so handsome as Madge was, and with that coquettish consciousness of her charms which made them more dangerous still, it was no wonder that she had plenty of admirers, more than one of whom, with a little encouragement, would have been an excellent match for her, so far as good means and prospects went. But the keeper wanted more than that from the man to whom he gave his daughter. When he parted with her it must be to one who would be as tender over her, as jealous for her happiness, as patient and indulgent as he had been himself. And Giles, believing in his heart that Ralph Burton, and no other man, would be all this to her, was inwardly longing for Madge to encourage the young man's suit, a thing which she seemed at present perversely disinclined to do.

She was perfectly aware, however, of her father's wishes on the subject; and she was instinctively conscious that, in what he had been saying, there was a covert allusion to the young

farmer's qualifications in a matrimonial point of view. But Madge just now was less disposed than she might have been a few weeks ago to have Ralph Burton thus thrust into the foreground of her life. His figure, placed so prominently there, intercepted her view of the dream-scenery which, as if by magic, had arranged itself on fancy's stage, and, in its plain farmerly habiliments, contrasted awkwardly with that other handsome, well-dressed, and much more important personage who at any moment might appear sauntering towards her down the sunlit glade, or emerging from one of the side paths that led through the covert of the wood.

Mr. Pelham was coming again before he went away, coming to say "Good-bye" to her, and this was the third evening since he had told her so. All day long her thoughts had been ringing their bewildering changes on those whispered words of his. He was coming again, coming to see her! Just so, years ago, the old Squire his father had gone over Langley Pyke, and climbed the rough hill-path to the quarryman's cottage, to see the girl who was afterwards lady of the Priory House. It was for her

beauty that he had fallen in love with her, and wooed her and married her, and then taken her away with him to foreign parts, where she had lived beside him like a lady born. Why should it be impossible to suppose that the young Squire might have fallen in love now, as his father had fallen in love before him, and that he meant to win her, and some day to marry her and make a lady of her, too? Such a lady as Madge felt it would be so easy for her to become. It had all happened before with Phœbe Gale. Why should it not happen over again with her?

Madge had asked herself the question, looking for an answer in the little swing glass that stood on the chest of drawers in her attic bedroom; remembering, too, the stolen kiss, the whispered words. And, as she looked, the dark eyes gazing out upon her had seemed to flash the question back again.

"*Why not?*"

She had finished shelling her peas, and was sitting with her hands clasped idly upon the bowl, lingering for just another moment before she went into the cottage. It was half after

seven by the day, later still by the kitchen clock, which was always a good half hour beforehand. But the June evenings were long. Mr. Pelham might come even yet, and she was unwilling, if he did, to lose the first glimpse of his approaching figure. There was an exquisite *abandon* in her attitude, softened as it was, not by physical weariness, but by the first lassitude of hope deferred. Her head, with its dark abundant hair knotted loosely round it, lay back against the trellis of the porch; and, from the rounded throat, down to the shapely feet flecked over by the sunlight that fell upon the sanded flags, nothing could be more perfect in its repose and grace than her figure, set off as it was to only the more advantage by the plainness of the blue linsey gown which was her every-day attire.

A single red rose was the only ornament she wore. It lent a piquancy to her simple costume, and gave the dash of colour which her fine eye told her was required. She had fastened it into the bosom of her dress, wondering as she did so whether Mr. Pelham would perhaps care for it as Ralph Burton had cared for the roses

she had let him have on Sunday. She closed her eyes for a moment with a half regretful pang as the thought came to her. Poor Ralph! Perhaps her father had been right in saying she was a little hard to him. And then she half started and looked up, for there was a step beside her, and a voice, and Mr. Pelham was standing there!

She had been watching for him down the woodland path, and, as it chanced, he had crossed by the plank over the brook at the back of the house. The pointer pup, which had been lying asleep in the porch, sprang up and began barking vociferously; her father, too, who had seen the young man as he passed the window, had come out into the porch to meet him. Madge felt the colour rush to her cheeks as she hurriedly arose. It was provoking to be taken so by surprise. She had intended, when Mr. Pelham came, to receive him with a little air of indifference, and had arranged her *rôle* accordingly. For Madge was a born coquette, and, though only a rustic beauty in a linsey gown and thick-soled shoes, no high-born Belgravian belle could be more conscious of her power to

charm, or more disposed to make a despotic use of the advantages with which nature's kind caprice had dowered her.

Apparently, however, Mr. Pelham was more *au fait* in the art of seeming than she was herself.

"Good evening, Brown," he said, with his gay, good-humoured smile, and a friendly nod, which seemed to include both the keeper and his daughter. "You will guess my errand, I daresay. I mean to have your pup, after all. I don't really want it, for one thing, and it is rather too high a price for another; but it has taken my fancy, and I can't let it slip."

"Very good, sir," said the keeper, in his slow, gruff way, as Pelham proceeded to draw out his purse, and counted down the money.

"Four pounds ten; and I think the pup may as well stay where it is for the present. I am going up to town to-morrow, and I had rather you had the charge of it; at all events, until I come back in September."

"Very good, sir," said Giles again. "Won't you step inside, sir, and sit down a bit?"

But Mr. Pelham preferred remaining where

he was, to stepping inside, whither Madge, who had recovered her self-possession and stood now looking as cool and careless as he was himself, might perhaps not choose to follow. He threw himself down, a little wearily, on the bench in the porch, and took off his hat, for the evening was warm, and he had evidently been walking both fast and far.

"I tell you what, Brown," he said, as he pushed back the hair from his heated brow, "I should uncommonly like a glass of your good ale, if you will give it me."

"To be sure, sir. Madge will fetch you one in a minute. And you may bring me a drop too," added Giles, as Madge, not sorry for the excuse, disappeared into the kitchen, whence she presently returned, bearing with her a jug of foaming ale and a couple of pewter mugs, polished as bright as any silver.

She had fortified herself on the way by a glance into the little mirror that hung behind the door, and came back now with a glow of pride upon her cheek, and a step as stately and elastic as that of some young gipsy queen. She might have spared the glance, however, for the young

Squire's looks, as she filled one of the mugs and handed it to him, told her a more flattering tale than the little dim mirror could possibly have done. He thanked her, too, with such gay politeness, and apologised with so much concern for the trouble he was giving her, that Madge could not help feeling her importance considerably enhanced by this delightful deference.

Mr. Pelham, it was clear, had found that it would not do to be too presuming, and was beginning to treat her more as if she were already the lady which it was quite possible she might one day be. If she had been Miss Marjory Daylmer herself, he could not, Madge thought, have shown himself more perfectly the gentleman than he was now. And yet, there was no mistake about it, he was admiring her with every look. Not with words, of course; he knew better than that. But compliments can be paid, when necessary, without the help of pretty speeches, and Mr. Pelham was paying them now in a way that made Madge feel on extremely good terms with herself and him.

What was poor Ralph's bashful homage

compared with this delicious incense that was breathing round her now? How tame and flat it seemed, that humdrum, patient love, with the little farm and the dairy and the butter-making at the end of it, beside the splendid visions that were shaping themselves more and more distinctly every moment now. For why, unless she had dreamed aright, should Mr. Pelham stay on so long sitting there beside her father, as if he were quite at home with them? Talking, too, in such a friendly, almost confidential way about his plans and prospects; about the management of the estate, and what he should like to have done if he had things more his own way; how he would not trouble himself over draining and reclaiming patches of scrubby moorland that were better left for sheep-runs, and how he wished the game were kept up better on the estate, and poaching more sharply looked after—a wish with which, of course, her father quite fell in? And why should he go on to speak of the dulness of the Priory House, and of the shut-up life his father led, and how different things would have been had his mother lived? And why should he glance towards her so

often with that meaning look, making her heart each time give such a plunge beneath her linsey bodice? Did he wish her to understand that if he were not ashamed of his mother, and of her lowly birth, neither would he be ashamed of the same in her?

Madge thought he did. And as daylight faded out, and twilight fell, and still they all sat together in the soft sweet summer gloaming, she felt his eyes resting so often admiringly upon her, and was conscious altogether of such an atmosphere of flattering regard, that if Mr. Pelham had been some rustic beau, instead of the young heir of the Priory House, she would have been quite certain that his fancy had been caught.

It was growing dusk before he made a move to go. The keeper had just gone inside the kitchen to put a billet on the fire, and, at the same moment, Pelham rose.

"I could sit here another hour," he said, "but I have fifty things to do after I get home to-night."

And then, in a lower tone, and bending towards Madge, he added,

"I want a rose for my button-hole. Won't you give me this?"

He touched lightly the one she wore in her dress, looking at her, as he spoke, with a gay, entreating smile. Madge blushed and hesitated. Then quickly, for she heard her father's footsteps turning towards the door, she took the rose from her bosom, and gave it to the young man.

As quickly Pelham seized it, thanking her with a glance, and had stepped outside the cottage porch before the keeper re-appeared.

"Good night, Brown, good night," he said. "I have kept you too long from your supper, I am afraid."

And nodding lightly over his shoulder, and casting a careless smile behind him, the young Squire strolled off, adjusting his rose as he went along.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORNING IN THE WOODS.

THE Canon had said quite truly that the little village of Marholm, quiet and even dull as it might seem to the stranger's eye, was not exactly a spot in which to court seclusion. You might as well have tried to hide the sun in the sky as to conceal the fact that a visitor had taken up his abode at the "Danvers' Arms." Before Hugh had been in residence a week he had been discussed all over, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Indeed, in the whole parish, hardly a man, woman, or child could have been found who had not contrived somehow to get a passing glimpse, or to make a leisurely inspection of him. Female heads were popped out of cottage doors, or raised

surreptitiously over window-blinds, as the fresh arrival passed along; petticoated urchins ran out into the street, and, with fine unceremoniousness, took a comfortable stare; the labourers stood up in the furrows and watched him, as he strolled along, in his grey tweed suit, with his artist's paraphernalia slung across his shoulder. Even the dogs made up to him, and sniffed inquiringly about his legs, and the very kine and oxen, perceiving the phenomenon as they grazed knee-deep in the fat pasture fields, raised their heads and regarded him with a look of calm, bovine curiosity. Above all, at church, where he had unwarily planted himself just by the chancel door, in a seat facing down the aisle, he found himself a mark for almost as many pairs of eyes as there were heads in the congregation. A stranger in their midst was evidently an innovation on the established order of things, to which the rustic mind took some little time to adjust itself.

It did so at last, however, and in kindly fashion, too.

"He's one o' the raight soort, is you," said old Humphrey Blenkinsop, the spokesman of

the little knot of patriarchs who gathered on the green, and a personage much looked up to as being more weatherwise than anyone else in Marholm. "He's of a good mek of stuff; noan o' your fine folks' nonsense aboot him. I'se warrant him to weer well, fine weather or foul."

And the Marholm folk accepted Humphrey's verdict as in the main agreeing with that which they had individually formed; and, figuratively speaking, they bestowed on the new comer the freedom of the place, gave him back honest goodwill in return for his own, and, in short, took to him as kindly and completely as he had shown himself disposed to take to them.

That was a comfortable beginning of things. Hugh felt the genial atmosphere as one feels the sunshine in the air, and worked the better for it. There was a subtle stimulus in the looks of tacit or open friendliness which, from the rectory down to the big kitchen of the "Danvers' Arms," he everywhere encountered; a suffused sense of fellowship that reduced to a minimum the friction of daily life, and left every power free to play at ease. It was astonishing to himself how easily his work swung on, what

force and energy he found himself able to put forth; an energy to an artist so needful, especially at the commencing stage of a picture, when the creative faculty is put to its utmost strain, and any initial feebleness of conception must leave its trace in the impoverishment of the completed task.

It was a glorious June, one such as Hugh thought he had never since his boyhood known. Rain came sometimes, but it came softly in the night, leaving the morning to break only the more resplendently. And it was this morning effect that he was, above all, anxious to secure in his picture; the crisp, fresh clearness of the woodland in that sweet beginning of the day when the dew still lies on moss and bracken; when each tiniest flowercup holds unexhaled its sparkle of golden light, while overhead every leaf in the foliaged vault is quivering to the breeze, and laughing in the sun-filled air. No doubt, the long slant sunset rays gave richer effects of warmth and colouring. He had been tempted at first to paint the woods at eventide, all steeped in the mellow slumberous light, but afterwards he had given up the thought.

Perhaps it was the strong, full tide of energy and hope, pouring through his veins and vivifying all his life just now, that made him feel more in accord with the commencing than with the declining day. Each morning broke for him like a bridegroom coming forth from his chamber, rejoicing like a strong man to run a race; and wisely he chose his task according to his mood.

He had a shed put up in the Chase, at a spot commanding the glen and upland which he had selected for his subject; a sort of log "shanty," like that of an American backwoodsman, roughly knocked together, but substantial enough to turn the rain, and sufficiently commodious to hold both himself and the square yards of canvas which he had stretched for the picture. He had divers rude appliances for comfort, too; not unnecessary, considering that for two or three months to come the shanty would have to serve him as a home during the greater part of every day. For every available hour he wanted to spend at his easel; indeed, when the day was fine, after dispatching his six o'clock breakfast in Mrs. Boynton's sunshiny parlour, he did not often find his way back until dinner time came

round at six o'clock again. Nay, sometimes it was later even than that. For, if he chanced to be more than usually absorbed in what he was about, he would paint on till sundown surprised him, and, pausing at his task, would wake up to the fact that it was near two hours past the time when he was due at the "Danvers' Arms."

There was a larder, to begin with, improvised out of a hollow in an immense beech-tree, whose huge grey bole, gigantic in its girth, formed the greater part of one end of the hut. Another hollow underneath, lined with a natural growth of softest, coolest moss, might have been intended for a miniature wine-cellar, so admirably did it answer the purpose to which it was now applied. Hugh was no Sybarite. His commissariat seldom extended beyond a loaf of Mrs. Boynton's home-made bread, and a well-cut portion of one of the excellent Stiltons for which the farmers' wives in the neighbourhood were famous. Still lunch of some sort in the midst of a twelve hours' fast is a thing which even artistic genius cannot quite dispense with. For it is a fact that, if the brain is to distil its subtle quota of creative force, it must be liberally sup-

plied with that physical pabulum which it is the part of its humbler associates to provide. A fact which Hugh knew full well, and prudently fell-to about mid-day, and that in no stinted fashion either, upon his frugal fare, which, washed down by a bottle of light wine, never failed to afford him an excellent repast.

A wooden shelf served him for a table. Chairs he had none. When he was at work he liked to stand before his easel, so as to have the full command of every limb; and this attitude his well-knit muscles and a finely-poised frame made easy to him, so that even the old camp-stool which did duty for the well-stuffed easy-chair of more luxurious studios, was somewhat of a superfluity in his modest establishment. But a couch he had, luxurious enough; for the burly beech, most accommodating of trees, curved forth its projecting roots in a way that might almost have seemed to indicate some pre-established harmony with the sinuosities of the recumbent human form. Covered with a bear-skin rug, no better lounge could be desired for half an hour's siesta, or for indulgence in a lazy pipe.

These, with a miscellaneous litter of artists' materials, oils, colours, brushes, rags, palettes, and the like, completed the inventory of his sylvan abode; and hither daily Hugh repaired, flinging himself upon his task like a lion on its prey, each morning returning to it with fresh zest and energy, and braced continually to further effort by the consciousness that, so far, he was succeeding, almost beyond his hopes, in transferring to canvas the beauty of the scene before him.

Lord Danvers would be satisfied, thoroughly so. Hugh felt sure of that. He knew it by that noble content in his work, as far removed from vulgar complacency as from the disquiet of baffled toil, which the true artist feels when he has seized and fixed his own ideal. The picture, if it were finished as he had begun it, would be worth more, even as the work of a comparatively unknown artist, than the three hundred pounds which had been settled as the price of his commission. If it were exhibited next spring, as he might hope it would be, this "*Morning in the Woods*," shining in all its dewy splendour from the Academy walls, might win

for him name and fame, and place him at once well up in the ranks of those who had made their mark in the world of Art. His pulses quickened at the thought. That was a goal worth striving for. And then, too—for fame seldom comes empty-handed—he might snap his fingers at those wretched dealers who had been the plague of life to him hitherto, grinding him down to part with his pictures for little more than the cost of their production, and might fill his hands for the future with commissions direct from liberal purchasers.

Hugh was a genuine artist. He painted as the birds sing, for very love of it; and, if he could have had his will, would never have sold a single picture, keeping them by him as a man would keep his children round his hearth. To part with even a sketch to one of those bargaining dealers, who would look upon it only in the light of a marketable commodity, gave him a pang as if he were passing it through the fire to Moloch. Yet now, as he paused before his easel, and drew back, brush in hand, to consider the effect of his advancing work, he found himself continually going off into calculations of

the price which the success of his present work might embolden him to set upon another, and on the amount of work which he could turn out in a year, supposing he were lucky enough to get a run of good commissions.

Not that anything in the air of Marholm was making him more mercenary than of old. Money in the abstract was no more an object of attraction than ever it had been. Hugh was one who had always sat easily to the superfluities of life. He had managed somehow to keep in his pocket enough to pay his way as he went along, and his easy, half Bohemian life asked but little for either luxury or need. With his brush in his hand, and his old tanned meerschaum for companion, he had faced the world contentedly; and to have made a thousand pounds on a picture, instead of a hundred, would have been rather a source of perplexity than otherwise, as involving him in an embarrassing superfluity of cash.

But he could not deny, even to himself, that he was beginning to look with a new respect on money as a power. The fact was continually obtruding itself upon him that a man whose

annual income is hardly worth mentioning, must shut his eyes to a good deal which he might otherwise permit himself to contemplate. He had done so himself in the past. Art had been his mistress, the only one he had cared to serve; and, following her, he had scarcely felt inclined to diverge into more flowery paths, from the rough and beaten track which his narrow fortunes had marked out for him. But a man can seldom with any certainty forecast his future from his past. Since his first visit at the rectory—Nay, from the hour when he had leaned with folded arms on that five-barred gate in the Chase, watching the grey-clad figure passing quietly out of sight—he had been conscious of an influence as subtle as it was persistent, impelling his thoughts, almost against his will, in a direction which he was fain to acknowledge it would be utterly impossible to pursue, except in connection with a considerable increase in the profits of his profession.

It was natural, of course, to speculate on the somewhat improbable possibility of an immediate largesse from Fortune's hand. Artists do leap sometimes into celebrity on the strength of a

single picture; and what others had done he might do himself. Three months ago his present commission had seemed to him a splendid thing. Who could say but that three years hence he might be able to set a price of as many thousands on a picture as now he was glad to get hundreds? It might be so; but no wise man would count with any confidence on such a chance being his. Common sense would not be cajoled by imagination, however she might flatter; and Hugh had a good deal of straightforward, practical common sense, balancing the imaginative element in his character.

To fall in love with Miss Elphinstone would be clearly a folly, so clearly that he hardly felt himself in danger of committing it. Indeed, the very consciousness of being on his guard made him feel it the less incumbent on him to hold his thoughts in too strict a leash, when they swerved aside, as continually they did, to play about that enchanting form. Hugh, in his own way, had pride enough for the descendant of a hundred earls. He would have scorned to marry a girl whose fortune and position were above his own; and, in his present circum-

stances, to have even dreamed of waking love in the heart of the Canon's niece would have seemed to him a cowardly *lâche*, an absolute breach of honour on his part, and betrayal of the trust tacitly reposed in him. He had said to himself, from the beginning, that the thought was not to be entertained. He did not mean to entertain it. But that he found this girl most exquisitely sweet and fair, full of all tender and perfect grace, was no reason, surely, for rushing into folly in an opposite direction, by churlishly rejecting the Canon's proffered hospitality, and shutting himself out altogether from the rectory. He would lash himself to the mast safely, he could trust himself for that, and listen to the magic voice which just now was sounding soft and low through every chamber of his soul.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CANON'S GUEST.

A DANGEROUS resolution, perhaps. But a man, a young man especially, does not often contemplate the possibility of being mastered by an inclination which he has determined to resist. Besides, our artist reasoned, he could hardly make a hermit of himself altogether; and though a modicum of attention had been shown him by the half-pay officers and the elderly dames and gentlemen who inhabited the houses at the upper end of the village, and even by one or two of the country gentlemen in the neighbourhood, still the rectory was the only house at which society was offered to him of a kind that he would care to cultivate. It was

such a thoroughly hospitable house too, such a perfect English home; and to a man who, like Hugh, had been buffeted about a good deal in the world, and with a disposition naturally kindly had been compelled to see more of the rough than of the gentle side of life, that in itself was a strong attraction. Go when he would, he always found a welcome, from the Canon especially; so that after the first week or two of his residence at Marholm there were not many evenings that did not find him at the rectory, if it were only for five minutes' chat with the ladies on the lawn, or a turn round the garden with the Canon, who was fond of a peripatetic post-prandial cigar.

Dinner itself he generally excused himself from, though invitations were pressed cordially enough upon him. He was such an uncertain mortal, he said. He never could be sure beforehand that, just when he wanted to put down his brush, something in his work would not imperatively require his keeping at it for another hour. But afterwards, when the more formal repast was over, and everyone, as was the

custom at the rectory, down even to Rouse and Marjory's kitten, had turned out to enjoy the sunset hour in that delicious, old-fashioned garden, it became almost an understood thing that, if nothing stood in the way on either side, Mr. Beverley should join the little group, to have a cup of Miss Millicent's coffee, and to smoke a friendly cigar with the Canon, as they sat under the great walnut-tree on the lawn, or sauntered through the shrubbery-walks.

No one could be a more agreeable companion than Hugh when he found himself among people with whom he could feel thoroughly at home. He had a travelled ease of manner, a genuine *bonhomie*, that seemed to warm all the atmosphere about him; a dash of humour, too, in his ways occasionally, mellowing his speech and giving a flavour of enjoyment to the merest nothings of the hour. Such peals of laughter rang out sometimes from under the shadow of the walnut-tree as seriously to chagrin old Caleb, who considered the dignity of his master's establishment in danger of being compromised thereby, and who would keep an uneasy look-out at such times down the rectory

lane, lest any of the village folk, passing within earshot, should be tempted into irreverent remark.

The Canon's views, however, differed from those of his trusty old servitor. There was no finer test, he used to say, of a man's character, or of a woman's either, than the power of hearty laughter; fit time and place, of course, being given. Surface cachinnation there might be, both loud and long; but no shallow nature, he maintained, was capable of that honest, whole-souled laughter, wanting which the man himself was incomplete. Only from depths within could that glorious foam arise.

And yet at the heart of him there was gravity enough in Hugh to meet the Canon's deeper moods. Life had been no summer pastime to him, any more than to the older man. He had seen and known too much of its mystery and strife, its baffling disappointments, its profound and sad enigmas, to be no more than the companion of a careless hour. Much discourse they had, as they paced together up and down the laurel-walk, on what his friends were wont to term "the Canon's Hobbies;" things that the

clerical conscience, whether rightly or wrongly, generally holds itself supremely indifferent to, but which the Rector of Marholm was terribly in earnest about, pondering over them incessantly, writing on them, labouring at them with all his might. Much to the prejudice of his own interests, people said. A good stirring pamphlet on the Endowment of Bishoprics, or a treatise on the Authority of the Ecclesiastical Courts, would be far more likely to pave the way to promotion than all this boring of himself and others with plans for housing the labouring poor or bringing up pauper children, for the repression of crime, or the regulation of the traffic in drink. If indeed a clergyman, more especially a dignitary of the Church, was justified in meddling at all with such purely secular matters.

The Canon thought otherwise. He was apt on a good many points, though by no means a combative or disputatious man, to differ considerably from the opinions that passed current in the world around him. Christianity, he held, would never be a supreme power in the world until man's duty to man was taught as distinctly

and urgently as its Founder himself had taught it. Not love to the invisible God alone, but love to the visible Neighbour too, must be the rule of life; and every nest of foul, dilapidated houses in which the helpless poor were lodged, every pauper orphan shut out from the charities of a home, every sixpence taken for drink served out to a drunken wretch, should be as the groan of the man lying by the wayside stripped and robbed and wounded. And if the priest and Levite passed him by, woe be to them! for at their hands his blood should be required.

That was the Canon's theory, and his practice too; being, as all might know, a man who had the courage of his convictions, and who shaped his life by his belief. And this truth to himself it was which had so attracted him to Hugh, in whom he found the like, and had set open the rectory gate to the young man as a frequent and welcome guest.

But it was under the walnut-tree on the lawn, when they were all chatting gaily or quietly together, or reading aloud as they often did, or silently enjoying the peace and stillness of the

sunset hour, that Hugh's pleasantest hours were passed. They all felt so at home with one another. That was the great charm of the rectory; and if at times some slight shadow of distance folded round Marjory, or just a hint of hauteur or seeming caprice disclosed itself in her demeanour towards himself, to Hugh's willing fancy it was no more than the little thorn upon the rose, and did but heighten the sense of her after-graciousness. For she was gracious sometimes; so sweet and winning in her ways that Hugh found it a little hard to keep the curb upon himself quite so tightly as he wished. His coming was pleasant to her; as indeed, to a girl living in a quiet country parsonage, it was natural that it should be; and Hugh could not help knowing that it was so. She liked the breeze of fresh life that he brought in with him, stirring as it did the sunny calm in which her days were passed. Above all, she was grateful for the resource which his society evidently was to her uncle. For, genial and kindly as the Canon was, Marjory felt, with a woman's keen perception, that he stood very much alone in their little world. He had few

like-minded with himself, to whom he could freely pour out the things that lay nearest to his heart; and Hugh's attentive ear supplied him with an outlet for much that was the daily burden of his thought.

It always did Uncle Bernard good, so Marjory used to say, to have a talk with some one who could understand him. And there was never a softer light upon her face, or a sweeter cadence in her voice, than when Hugh came back for a word or two with the ladies, after he and the Canon had been pacing the laurel-walk, deep in discourse, for a longer time than usual. Then if he ventured, as sometimes he did, to ask for a song before he went away, he was seldom put off with a refusal. And when Marjory sang one song it was generally the prelude to another, and another, until, before she had ceased, twilight had often stolen on them unawares.

She enjoyed it herself; so did Miss Millicent, as she sat purring her knitting-needles in the cushioned bay of the great oriel window; above all, the Canon liked it too. It soothed and rested him when the day was done to listen to

the young clear voice, tender and deep sometimes, and rich with an unconscious pathos.

"Go on, Marjory; go on!" he would say, if the girl paused and turned round to them from her seat at the piano, as if there was nothing more to come. And Marjory was always ready to obey her uncle's least behest.

At such times Hugh sat forgotten, content to have it so. But when the singing was ended, and the Good-byes had been said, and he was alone in the scented dusk, going down the garden-path to the rectory gate, Marjory's voice would still linger in his ear. And, as he took his way homeward along the silent village street, continually he found his steps keeping time to some sweet or sad refrain which, like fragrance in the air, seemed to fold him round and penetrate his very soul with languorous delight. His discussions with the Canon were not often remembered then; and if his thoughts turned to the picture slowly growing on its canvas yonder in the Chase, it was chiefly in undefined association with future prices.

Hugh was thirty years old, and had been toughened by a good deal of knocking about in

life; but, going back to his lodgings after these evenings at the rectory, the soft summer starlight raining down influence upon him, he became conscious, at times, of a yielding fibre in the moral muscle of his will. Then, with a gesture of impatience at his weakness, he would shake himself out of his unreal world, and half resolve to make a longer pause than usual between his visits. Sometimes he kept his resolutions; but more frequently the next evening found him at the rectory again, an expectant and expected guest, braced anew against temptation, and prepared afresh to expose himself to its dangerous delights.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SUDDEN THOUGHT.

"OH, dear, Mrs. Boynton, how you startled me!" cried Madge, as the good lady, in her coloury shawl and Sunday silk, sent her voice before her from the garden-gate to the porch, where, for the last half hour, Madge had been sitting, her work dropped idly on her knees, and her thoughts lost among the dreams which were now so suddenly dispersed.

Mrs. Boynton laughed, and fanned her face with her pocket-handkerchief, as she came up the garden-path and deposited herself upon the bench in the porch.

"A penny for your thoughts," she cried; "they were off somewheres away from home,

I'll be bound. In the new dairy at the Moor Farm, maybe?"

"They were nowhere near the Moor Farm, Mrs. Boynton," said Madge, ruffling up, a little consciously. "They are not so fond of travelling that way as some folk seem to think."

The landlady nodded her head with a knowing air.

"They might go farther and fare worse," she returned, her comely visage broadening into a sagacious smile. "But, however, that is your business more than mine. I am not the woman, and never was, to put my key into other folk's doors. I had as lief steal a sovereign as a secret from them that hasn't a mind to give it me. But I have no time to stop talking now. I just came round to see if you would walk with me as far as the Priory House. The Squire has gone up to London with Mr. Pelham, and I've been promised ever so long to go and have tea with Mrs. Mapperly when she had the house to herself. I thought it would be a bit of a change for you, and we should be company coming home. It is lonesome over that moor by one-

self at nights, and it is enough to walk one's legs off going round by the road."

Madge made a feint of hesitation. Her father had gone to St. Bede's, she said, and would not be back till late, and there had need be some one at home to mind the house. But Mrs. Boynton's invitation was too welcome to be refused in earnest. It fitted itself, with a sort of odd surprise, to the thoughts that had been flitting through her brain. Nay, it seemed almost like a step towards shaping them into reality; for was not the Priory the very stage itself on which she had been treading in her dreams? She yielded her scruples to a little friendly pressure, folded up her work in token of consent, and went indoors to change her blue linsey for her Sunday gown, and make sundry small additions to her toilette, such as the formality of going out to tea required.

Mrs. Boynton eyed her approvingly when she re-appeared. She was a wholesome, honest-hearted woman, whose comely middle age did not grudge to others the possession of that youthful bloom which in herself had developed into a somewhat expansive maturity.

"I do declare, Madge," she exclaimed, "I never did see anyone your equal for doing credit to a bit of dress. Not as you need it like a many do; for if you was to go about in a sack you would contrive to look well in it. But, for all that, a bit of dress does set you off. You must make haste and get married, for it will be as pretty a sight as ever there was in Marholm church the day you are a bride."

"That's a poor reason as ever was for getting married, Mrs. Boynton," said Madge, laughing, as she locked the door and put the key in her pocket. "If you can't find a better, I may as well stay as I am."

"Nay, nay," rejoined the dame; "you'll none do that, reason or no reason. They are a poor lot are the men, when all's said and done; but we must either put up with them as they are or do without them. And I will say, Madge, I should like to see you settled down comfortable; and a good dairy, and a silk gown, and a house of your own, and everything respectable, as a girl like you has a right to look for."

Madge smiled a little loftily at this mild enumeration of the honours and emoluments of

matrimony; but she said nothing, and Mrs. Boynton, with a strong conjecture that her penetration had not been in fault, got up, shook out her ample skirts, and turned the current of remark by declaring that her rest had made her feel quite fresh again for her walk, and that they had better be setting off.

It was a brilliant afternoon. The air out on the moor was full of zest and freshness, the larks were singing high up in the blue; and at the end of their walk, as Mrs. Boynton had foretold, there was a hearty welcome for them both from Mrs. Mapperly. Visitors were few and far between, and life somewhat of the dullest, at the Priory House, and of all luxuries there were none for which the Squire's housekeeper had a keener relish than for a gossip with a friend over a comfortable cup of tea. She had spied her guests coming up the weedy walk that led round to the side entrance, and herself was at the door to greet them. She wore a limp black silk dress, and bands of limp grey hair on either side of her face, and presented altogether a limp and washed-out aspect, as of a woman who took her meals mostly by herself, and in whose

life there was a lack of that strong motive power which in Mrs. Boynton conduced to such decided energy of action.

Her slightly lugubrious countenance brightened with almost pathetic satisfaction as she ushered her company down a long, half-lighted corridor and into her own peculiar sanctum. Here Mrs. Boynton, whose stream of talk was in full tide, sat down, and, throwing back her bonnet-strings, declared that after their long walk nothing would be more acceptable than the cup of tea which Mrs. Mapperly was solicitously suggesting should be prepared at once.

Excellent tea it was, too; strengthened on the part of the elder ladies by the addition of what Mrs. Mapperly euphemistically termed "a spoonful of currant wine."

"Not as I allow myself to it other ways," she observed, with an explanatory cadence in her tone; "without it was now and again a drop of something warm at night. But in my tea I do resort to it thankfully sometimes, for the air of this house is depressing to that extent while you might think you were living in a well."

"It's along of there being no lady at the

Priory House," said Mrs. Boynton, her rosy visage beaming under the influence of the cheering beverage. "A house always feels lost without it has a mistress of its own. The old Squire had ought to have married again and furnished up a bit, and had things comfortable about him. But you will be having Mr. Pelham married one of these days, Mrs. Mapperly, and then there will be a change. It is three years this Michaelmas since he come of age, and time he was beginning to look about, if his father means him to settle. It would make all the difference in the world if the Squire had a nice handsome young daughter-in-law to 'liven things up a bit."

The housekeeper shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't see much chance of that, Mrs. Boynton; without Mr. Pelham and his father were to be a bit less contrairy than what they are now. The Squire is as close with his money as if he had to earn every penny that he spends, and he would never go to the expense of a wife for Mr. Pelham when he will scarce let him have what he wants to keep himself upon."

"Then he stands in his own light, that's what

he does," cried Mrs. Boynton, who, in common with not a few of the Marholm folk, had a decided leaning towards the impecunious but affable young heir. "Where is the use of his screwing and stinting that way, when there is nobody but Mr. Pelham for it all? I wouldn't blame him if he had been left with a heavy family on his hands, and nothing for them to look to but what he could save off the estate whilst he lived. It would be in the way of duty then to pinch and scrape a bit, so as he did it like a gentleman; but there is neither sense nor reason in it now. Mr. Pelham had ought to be looking to settle, and let to go courting; and there is Miss Marjory, his own cousin, grown up ready for him, and a fortune in her hand, and everything convenient. And what would the Priory be then, Mrs. Mapperly, with a young lady like her to hold things up, and bring company to it, and turn it right end uppermost again, as it hasn't been, to my knowledge, for these thirty years and more?"

The housekeeper shook her head again with a despondent smile. Mrs. Boynton pushed back her chair from the table, and fanned herself with

her pocket-handkerchief, Her tea and indignation together had made her warm.

"There's many a young man goes wrong," she resumed, "with nothing but being reined up over-tight at home. They will break loose if they can, and Mr. Pelham has a deal of sperrit in him. You mark my words, Mrs. Mapperly. If the Squire don't give him his chances, and settle him down as a young gentleman in his place has a right to look for, either he'll go to the bad, right away, and there will be his debts on the estate when he comes into it, or he'll get picked up by some girl without a penny, that will be willing to marry him on nothing, and wait for the old man dropping off. There are plenty would do that, gentle or simple; for a better-looking, affabler young gentleman you needn't ask for than Mr. Pelham. He favours his mother there, though she wasn't quality born. And that puts me in mind, Mrs. Mapperly, I was saying to myself only the other day that next time I came here I would have a look at her picture again, the one the Squire had painted in Italy. And here is our Madge may see it too, and then she can judge for herself whether she

was handsome or she wasn't; for she has asked me oftens enough about her. Bless me," she added, turning to the girl, "what a colour you have, to be sure! This room is warm, and that's the truth, Mrs. Mapperly, what with the walk, and what with the tea."

"It will be cooler upstairs," said the housekeeper. And her visitors having assured her already that they could not possibly take another cup, though pressed to do so on the plea that the best of the tea remained in the pot, she proposed that they should at once adjourn to the Blue Parlour, where the family portraits hung.

Their footsteps echoed as they went through the unmatted corridor, and up the wide oaken staircase of the dreary old mansion; and the air felt chill and unstirred around them, when the housekeeper, selecting a key from the bunch which she carried at her side, unlocked a ponderous double door, and ushered her guests into a stately, half-lighted room, where the silent company, gazing at them from the massive frames that lined the wall, seemed blankly to question this intrusion on their solitude. Madge

felt her heart beat a little tremulously. She glanced furtively around, impressed by the faded splendour and funereal gloom, and then her eyes were arrested by a brilliant, beaming face, on which a flood of mellow sunlight poured, as Mrs. Mapperly, who had stepped on tiptoe across the room, raised one of the heavy Venetian blinds that obscured the windows.

A vine-wreathed terrace, a background of blue Italian sky, and, standing out against it, a golden head, a cloud of shining hair, and a tall, imperially moulded figure, to which the sweeping folds of an embroidered Watteau robe lent a certain careless stateliness. It was the low-born lady of the Priory House! Madge knew it by the likeness to the young Squire; and a sudden pang smote through her at sight of the flashing beauty, which seemed for the moment to crush her with a sense, unknown till now, of mortified inferiority.

"Ay, that's her!" cried Mrs. Boynton, her ringing tones dispelling the silence, as the sunlight had dispersed the gloom. "How she features Mr. Pelham, to be sure! Anybody may tell where he got his good looks from.

Dear, dear!" she added, dropping to a lower key; "one needn't wonder that the Squire was took with her, struck all of a heap, I've heard folks say, the very first time he set eyes on her. Though that is not to say he should have demeaned himself to marry her. Quality is quality, I always say; and commonalty is commonalty, be it as handsome as it may."

"But she wouldn't look like that when she lived up at Langley Pike?" said Madge, glancing down at her own ninepenny calico, and struggling desperately against the sense of contrast between her humble self and this dazzling dame, who, to her jealous fancy, seemed eyeing her with looks of gay disdain.

Mrs. Boynton laughed.

"She didn't wear her satins and pearls, I'll warrant, when she was making butter and scrubbing floors in her father's cottage. But there are some folk, same as I was saying to you, Madge, it doesn't signify what they wear. They'd look well in anything, be it a sack or a satin gown."

"She thought a deal about her dress, anyhow, did Madam;" interposed the housekeeper. "Hours and hours I've known her sit, studying

what would become her best, and trying on this thing and that, till she had got everything to her mind. And then what a picture she was, to be sure! I wouldn't wish to disparage what you was saying, Mrs. Boynton, but there's no denying it, dress does make a difference. Now, Madam was handsome enough for anything, and if ever she looked so it was when I'd got her sat down before the glass, with just her muslin wrapper on, and her hair all tumbling down like yellow gold about her shoulders. But it was dress made her look the lady, Mrs. Boynton, like what she is in her portrait there."

"Mrs. Mapperly," said the landlady, with the air of a woman laying down the law on matters which she well understood, "that was along of Madam not being quality to begin with. There's Miss Marjory now. She is not what you would call regularly handsome, though I always say she is as sweet as a rose in June, and she has the loveliest shapes, and a step like a princess. But, let her wear what she will, she is the lady, every inch of her. I've seen her in a holland dress that hasn't cost as much as this that Madge has on now, and a

straw hat with just a bit of brown ribbon round the crown, and stood talking maybe to some poor body on the green, and there was 'quality' wrote on her as plain as the 'I believe' on the church Tables. It's bred and born in her, Mrs. Mapperly, that's what it is. And if she was to marry to a title instead of to Mr. Pelham, and there's no knowing but what she may, she wouldn't need to be beholden, like Madam there, to a satin train and a string of pearls, to look the lady that she is."

"That is true, Mrs. Boynton," returned the housekeeper, apologetically. "and I wouldn't go for to even them together. But I will say, though she wasn't a lady born, no one could look more like one than Madam, when she was dressed up to it."

"I don't doubt it," replied the landlady, drily. "'Fine feathers make fine birds.' I'll be bound for it our Madge would look as much like a lady, if she was dressed up to it, as ever Madam Elphinstone did."

"Me!" cried Madge, startled into speech by this open assertion of what she had been secretly cogitating herself.

"To be sure," said the landlady, her face brightening with a sudden thought. "Bless me! why, truth is no flattery; and, by what I remember of her, there is not a pin to choose between you and Madam Elphinstone for looks. Mrs. Mapperly, you'll excuse me, I know, but there are them dresses of Madam's that you have laid by in yon big wardrobe would be no worse for being shook out a bit. We might go and have a look at them, if you was agreeable. There is nothing I enjoy more than seeing a bit of dress, and Madge has a figure that would set them off beautiful. She would do you credit, I know, if you was to try your hand upon her, and nobody would be the worse for their being put on just for once."

Mrs. Mapperly looked aghast for a moment at the sacrilegious suggestion, and then warmed to the proposal. Certainly Madge did look uncommonly handsome, and the temptation of having this blooming young creature under her hands, and transforming her for the nonce into an imaginary lady of the Priory House, was more than she could resist.

"It would never do to mention it," she said,

fingering her keys with a cautionary air. "But I don't see as there would be any harm, if it was to oblige you, Mrs. Boynton; and the things do want airing. I haven't had them opened out since last spring was a twelvemonth."

Mrs. Boynton beamed triumphantly.

"It is time you had them looked at, then. There's nothing mildews things like having them folded up from year's end to year's end. Come, Madge! We'll have you dressed out while you won't know yourself again."

Madge tossed her head with an air of coquettish indifference. She would not for the world that anyone should know how the blood was dancing at her heart at the bare idea of the splendid transformation-scene in which she was to bear a part; or how she was longing, yet fearing, too, to put herself to the test which only the other day she had dreamed of in her little attic at home as an unattainable delight.

"We could see the things just as well without me trying them on," she said, inwardly quaking lest she should be taken at her word.

But Mrs. Boynton struck in with good-humoured authority.

"Just you hold your tongue, Madge, and do as you are bid. We are out for a bit of pleasuring, and we may as well have it while we have the chance. It isn't often that the Squire is out of the way, and all convenient. Come, Mrs. Mapperly, lead the way!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CINDERELLA.

MRS. MAPPERLY obeyed, nothing loath, and convoyed her company again through the long, resounding corridors, and up another flight of the wide oak staircase, to the great state bed-room, a solemn, silent apartment, looking empty, swept, and garnished, as it had been for the last twenty years or more. For since the late Mrs. Elphinstone's death no guests ever came to the Priory; or if by chance a stranger stayed all night, it was no one of more importance than the Squire's man of business, or some bachelor acquaintance of Mr. Pelham's who might be put up anywhere.

Madge shivered a little, oppressed by the same aspect of funereal gloom which had reigned

in the Blue Parlour down below. Everything in the room was dark and massive, and, to her unaccustomed eyes, magnificent beyond anything that she had ever seen before. The bedstead of black oak, richly carved, stood out with its hangings of mulberry-coloured damask like a huge catafalque into the room. Between the shrouded windows was a dressing-table, set out with costly toilet china and foreign glass, of glowing tints and curious device, and bearing two bronze candelabra, branching out on either side of a tall mirror, in which, as Madge entered the room, she was startled by a vision of her own figure, advancing as from some shadowy distance towards her. The chairs and couches were covered with faded embroidery; there were portraits on the walls, faded too; and in a recess on the further side of the room was an immense *armoire* of black oak, which Mrs. Mapperly approached, her footsteps falling soft and soundless on the thick-plied carpet, and solemnly unlocked.

A fragrant odour issued from the shelves within, as the doors swung slowly open—a scent of lavender and roses, whose dead sweet-

ness had lain prisoned there with the feminine paraphernalia now so long unneeded and unworn. Madge went forward, fluttered and expectant, and looked on with eager eyes as the housekeeper took out a limp white package of portentous size, carefully enveloped in muslin, and laid it upon the bed.

"That," she said, in a muffled voice, "is the identical pearl satin that Madam wore to have her portrait took. And this," she added, bringing forth another, "is the blue brocade that she had made for Mr. Pelham's christening, and never put on again, poor thing! And this is her black velvet, and, to my mind, the one she always looked the best in, too."

"Ay, now! Let us have a look at that first," said Mrs. Boynton, who had been drawing back the window curtains with brisk decision, and was now prepared to give her whole attention to the business in hand. "Never mind the others just now; they only spoil one another to see them together. Ah, there's dress for you!" she exclaimed, as the housekeeper, having removed the muslin wrapping, shook out the velvet folds, and displayed the robe in all its

sable splendour to her guests. "Why, a duchess might be proud of it. We'll have it tried on, Madge; and see what sort of a lady Mrs. Mapperly can make out of you. Nay, don't be foolish, child!" For Madge, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, was still coyly holding back from the magnificent ordeal. "It won't hurt you, nor the velvet either, to put it on, and you'll never have such another chance."

Madge only waited to be persuaded, and, finding that she could yield with a good grace, she slipped off the ninepenny print, fallen sadly now in her regards, and stood up in her short white skirt and scarlet bodice, ready for Mrs. Mapperly's transforming hand.

But even Mrs. Boynton could not refrain from a cry of astonishment, when, a moment later, the handsome head emerged from its cloud of drapery, and the creamy shoulders rose in their young smoothness above the velvet darkness of the sumptuous robe, which Mrs. Mapperly, with pursed-up lips and skilful hands, was busily adjusting.

"My goodness gracious, Madge, why, I should scarce have known you! it is just, for all the

world, as if you had had a fairy godmother touched you with her wand, as we used to read in the story-books when I was a girl."

"And fits her as if it had been made for her," said the housekeeper, who was threading a lace deftly in and out of innumerable eyelet holes. "She is Madam's figure exact. But good figures are sure to match; it is the poor ones that are some one shape and some another. One will be long and lank, and another thick-set, and another has the shoulders over high, and another has the back as round as a bolster. But a real handsome, well-made figure is like another that is handsome and well-made, all the world over; just one may be a trifle stouter or slighter perhaps than another.

"And your waist just the size of Madam's, too," continued the good lady, melting like a deliquescent jelly mould into quite a flow of reminiscence. "It wasn't a small waist. That is to say, it wasn't small, according to what ladies used to lace themselves to in those days, pinched up, while you would wonder where all their insides had got to. For it stands to reason ladies *have* insides, same as other folk. Many

is the good strong lace that I have broke in my time over young ladies' waists; and I will say, when I have been dressing Madam, I have begged and prayed of her to let me tighten her just the least bit, for I could have done it easily, and left her quite comfortable too. But, No! 'Mapperly,' she'd say, 'it is all a mistake about a tight waist being a beauty; there is nothing spoils a good shape like lacing tight. Just you look at the *Medicy Venus*,' she would say, for we were living in Rome then, where there were galleries full of pictures and statues, that I was used to go to with her. 'That Venus is reckoned to be the most beautiful figure of a woman in all the world, and her waist is twenty-seven inches round, so don't you try to lace me down to less.'

"And I never did," added the housekeeper, "for she had a will of her own, had Madam. She might have been a born Elphinstone, she had such a will."

"Elphinstone or no Elphinstone, she was in the right there," cried Mrs. Boynton. "I can't abide the looks of a wasp waist myself. There is always a bad digestion goes along with it, if

that is what you mean by being genteel; and it is ruination to the complexion, is a bad digestion. You have done well not to spoil yours that way, Madge. Dear me! why, them shoulders of yours are as if they were cut in ivory. It is wonderful how that black velvet sets them off. But doesn't there want a bit of lace, Mrs. Mapperly, just for a finish?"

"To be sure there does," said the housekeeper, who was settling the folds of the train with professional gravity. "Black velvet asks for lace, I always say; and there is Madam's set of Venice point I thought of putting on her. We'll have her turned out complete, Mrs. Boynton, while we are about it. And a flower in her hair, and a pair of kid slippers, and everything proper. And then she shall take a look at herself in the glass."

"I shall be like Mrs. Boynton, I expect, and hardly know myself again," said Madge, with as much carelessness as she could assume. For she felt her colour glowing, and her heart beating high with a tumult of expectation and delight. "But you are giving yourself a deal of trouble, Mrs. Mapperly."

"Don't you talk of trouble. It's a pleasure," returned the housekeeper, diving, as she spoke, into one of the drawers of the *armoire*, and bringing out the Venetian point. "I could almost think I was turned lady's-maid again, and dressing up Madam for a dinner or a ball, as I was used to do years and years ago. How choice she was, to be sure, over this set! And well she might, for it cost a heap of money. But she knew what suited her, and, if it was to ruin the Squire, have it she would; as you may judge, when I tell you that you have got over a hundred pounds' worth of lace on you this very minute."

"A hundred pounds' worth!" echoed Madge, her eyes wandering vainly in the direction of the mirror, which chanced to be so adjusted as to reflect nothing but the portrait of an elderly gentleman, in a bag wig and ruffles, who appeared to be attentively surveying the proceedings.

"And now something for your hair," continued Mrs. Mapperly, searching in the *armoire* again, and selecting thence a single crimson rose, which she fastened amongst the girl's

rich raven tresses, Mrs. Boynton, with her head on one side, critically regarding the operation, while Madge, trembling with repressed curiosity, stood passive under her tirewoman's hands. Then came the white kid slippers, fitting like Cinderella's own to the arched and rounded feet, whose fine contour even the Marholm shoemaker's clumsy boots had not quite concealed. And then the toilette was complete. Mrs. Mapperly retired a few paces, the better to note the general effect. Mrs. Boynton's rosy visage beamed with triumph.

"There now, Mrs. Mapperly! didn't I say that she would do credit to a bit of dress? I'll warrant Madam herself never looked better in them identical things than what our Madge does, standing there this very minute. Ay, that's right, Madge. Come and take a look in the glass. It isn't every day you have a chance to see yourself in black velvet and lace."

Madge went, with a strange flutter at her heart, eager yet half afraid of what the mirror might reveal. It was all very well to have Mrs. Boynton's assurance that she looked as much of a lady as Madam herself had done.

She craved her own assurance too; and that, not even the consciousness of being magnificently clad, nor the sweep of her velvet robe trailing behind her as she walked, sufficed to give. Handsome she knew she was. Mr. Pelham's admiring eyes had confessed plainly enough to the charm which her gipsy-like beauty exerted over him; but how would it be, if he could see her now? Would he think her awkward and foolish-looking in her unaccustomed grandeur, a daw in peacock's plumes? Or did dress really make such a difference as to leave nothing for him to be ashamed of, if—and her colour deepened at the thought which was growing almost at home in the secret of her bosom now—if he should do as the old Squire had done before him, and take his wife from a cottage home to be mistress of the Priory?"

A moment she stood, scarcely daring to look up. Then her lips parted with a quick breath of amazement and delight as she raised her eyes, and the whole dazzling vision burst at once upon her.

In the little looking-glass that stood upon the

chest of drawers in her attic at home, it had been, of course, impossible to obtain more than a piecemeal prospect of her face and figure. Indeed, it was only by a considerable amount of adjustment that she could succeed in including more than her head and a portion of her fine sloping shoulders in the same field of view. But in this ample expanse she saw reflected, from head to foot, what seemed to her the most superb-looking creature she had ever in her life beheld. With a figure like that of a young princess, and dark eyes flashing with excitement, and a rich, warm bloom as of a nectarine ripening on a sunny wall. And ah! how lovely those rounded arms, and smooth soft shoulders looked in their setting of filmy lace; and what magnificence there was altogether in that velvet gown, sweeping so grandly down to the ground; and then that little white-slippered foot peeping out. How charming and how wonderful it was!

Mrs. Boynton well might say she was one to do credit to a bit of dress. If, indeed, that really was herself, Madge Brown, standing in such splendour there! looking, if possible, more

beautiful, and certainly quite as much the lady as even the pictured presence in the room below. Ashamed of her! And Madge drew back her head with a gesture of coquettish pride. Mr. Pelham would have no reason for that. It was only a pity he could not see her now, to judge for himself how well she would be able to take her place among the quality when the time came to do so; as come it must, and should. For Madge was feeling, in that first exultant moment, as if a sceptre had been suddenly put into her hand, which she needed only to stretch forth, and all that she had dreamed of would be hers.

"I do declare, it's as good as a play," broke in Mrs. Boynton, who had noticed the girl's triumphant pleasure in herself. "I wouldn't have missed it for ever so much. You ought to have been born a lady, Madge; that's the truth. For I never did see how you carry it off."

"There's many a lady born wouldn't carry it as well," said Mrs. Mapperly, with a look of almost pathetic complacency. "They've poor figures, has a many of them, all padding and whalebone. You might as well dress a clock-

case, and expect it to look well, as try to turn them out passably, take what pains you will. Dear, dear! and to think of shoulders like them being wasted, as you may say, and never no one to see them from year's end to year's end. Why, they would be worth a thousand pounds to a many young ladies as I have known."

Madge smiled serenely, and turned a little sideways, so as to see herself from a fresh point of view. These complimentary expressions were very pleasant, none the less so because she had her own approval to confirm them now. Her doubts and fears had vanished like mists before the full blaze of the noonday sun, and the sense of mortified inferiority, which had stung her so sharply when she found herself in the Blue Parlour, face to face with that gay, disdainful dame, had changed into a thrill of most delicious triumph with the first glimpse of her own transfigured form. Even the faded old portraits on the walls seemed to be following her about approvingly with their dim, lustreless eyes. So she fancied, at least, as she shook out her rich draperies, and made a regal progress down the whole length of the room and

back again, her velvet train sweeping the ground in a way that she felt to be the very essence of dignity and grace, and her white-slippered feet peeping most bewitchingly in and out as she paced along. It was like dreaming with her eyes open. If only Mr. Pelham had been there to see it instead of Mrs. Boynton and the housekeeper. But it would all come one day. It would be sure to come! And with the thought Madge ruffled her plumes again as she stood before the glass, and a smile of full-assured content rippled unconsciously across her face. It was all so certain now to come!

And when, at last, the "play" was over, and Mrs. Mapperly, with careful hands, had reversed the process that had been gone through before, and Madge was left like Cinderella when the clock had struck, stripped of her splendid paraphernalia, and standing in her scarlet bodice and short white skirt, she felt still the thrill of triumph which had come with that fresh, keen consciousness of beauty and of power. The calico gown, as she put it on again, seemed like a poor disguise, in which she, the future lady of

the Priory, must be content for awhile to hide the splendour of her charms. Only for a little while, though; until Mr. Pelham should come back to Marholm—and to her. And then what conquests lay before her!

Madge was but a country girl, humbly born and humbly bred. But all the passions of humanity may beat in a village breast, and the passion for distinction was as strong in hers as in that of any newly-fledged M.P., whose ambition, as he makes his maiden speech, forecasts nothing less than the Premiership itself. To be the lady of the Priory, to sway the young Squire by the witchery of her beauty, was a prize worth striving for; and that glance into the mirror had been like a revelation that it was hers to win.

The velvet dress was solemnly laid by, and the pearl-grey silk and blue brocade as solemnly unfolded by the housekeeper, amid a running flow of comment and ejaculation on the part of Mrs. Boynton, whose admiration seemed only to grow more voluble with each fresh call upon it. Madge looked on with fluttered complacency, as

at the insignia of her future sovereignty. It was astonishing how familiar this feminine finery had suddenly become, and how easy it seemed, now that she had felt what dress could do, to fancy herself moving about those rooms and corridors, as much the lady in her sumptuous array as ever Madam herself had been. Her spirits rose with her new content, and the smouldering ambition, fanned suddenly into flame, just curved her lip, and drew into firmer poise her handsome head. Mrs. Boynton could not help observing the air of dignity that she had unconsciously assumed, and rallied her good-naturedly upon it. But Madge only straightened her tall figure to a yet more pine-like stateliness, and smiled quietly to herself. It was all very well for Mrs. Boynton to take these little liberties now. How astonished she would be if she should find out by-and-by that it was the young Squire's chosen bride with whom she had been making so free to-day. Mrs. Mapperly, too. If she could but know that it was perhaps her future mistress whom she had been dressing up! As there was no telling but she might have to dress her many

a time again, when she was a lady on her own account, and no make-believe one, such as she had been this afternoon.

But these were secrets to be kept locked and double-locked in her own breast as yet; concealed as carefully as any hedge-row bird hides its nest. Not for worlds must she let Mrs. Boynton guess that she looked any higher for a husband than to Mark Staniland or Ralph Burton, either of whom, Madge was aware, would be considered by the Marholm folk as an excellent match, certainly quite good enough for a gamekeeper's daughter.

They went downstairs at last, to have a slice of cake and a glass of gooseberry wine in the housekeeper's sanctum, before taking leave. For time was wearing on. Already the cedar-trees upon the lawn were casting long shadows across the ragged grass, and, as Mrs. Boynton said, it was a good step back to Marholm. It was past eight, however, before they finally set out. Even gooseberry champagne, when imbibed under favourable circumstances, has exhilarating properties, conducive to sociability, and goes down pleasantly over matronly palates.

Indeed, Mrs. Mapperly was quite drawn out into cheerfulness under its dulcet influences, and was so loath to let her guests depart that, if it had not been for Mrs. Boynton's dread of passing the quarry-pits after dusk, and Madge's fears lest her father should return from St. Bede's before she was at home herself, there was no knowing when they would have got away.

"But you'll come again," urged the housekeeper, relapsing into limpness, as she went with her guests down the weedy garden to the gate. "You'll come again. It's a charity, that's what it is, and nothing less, to take a cup of tea with a lone body like me."

"Eh, dear! Mrs. Mapperly," said the landlady, panting already in prospect of her long trudge home, "this will have to last me while another summer, I doubt. It fair takes the breath out of me only to think of that steep bit of bank there is to pull up on the other side of Lowstone Beck. And then there's over two miles through the Chase. But here is our Madge can come over and see you again, now she has made a start. It's none so far from her

place, and young legs reckons nothing of a bit of a climb."

Madge on her part promised willingly to repeat her visit some afternoon while the evenings were long. Not that she felt any lively pleasure in the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with the Squire's housekeeper. But her thoughts, flashing hither and thither among the possibilities of the future, seized at once on the advantage which it might be to have an easy excuse for going over to the Priory at any time, if affairs of her own should make it desirable to do so. Already, like a skilful general, she was reconnoitring the ground, and making tentative plans for the campaign which the young Squire's return was to be the signal for commencing. Mrs. Boynton thought she was uncommonly quiet as they came home together, and, privately, was a little put out to find her, as she expressed it to herself, such poor company on the road. But no busier brain could be than Madge's as she walked on by Mrs. Boynton's side in the gathering twilight, revolving all the chances of her young ambition. Phœbe Gale

had been handsome in her way, but not one bit handsomer than she was herself; and, as for being like a lady, who could make a better figure in velvet and lace, and all that belonged to the quality, than she, Madge Brown, had found out now that she could herself? And who was there that Mr. Pelham might be more proud to make the mistress of the Priory House, seeing that he did not seem any way ashamed of owning to his mother's birth, and was certainly, if looks and words told true, beginning at least to be in love with her?

Poor Mrs. Boynton! And she had been teazing her that very afternoon, Madge said to herself, about Ralph Burton and the Moor Farm. As if that was a thing that was ever likely now to come to pass!

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARHOLM FEAST.

THE June month slipped by, pleasant everywhere, but surely nowhere more so than in the woods and meadows and blossomy lanes of Marholm. Where else would you find such gay garniture of wild rose and eglantine, and purple vetch and twisted briony, or such wealth of honeysuckle trailing its perfumed wreaths over the green hedgerows? Where did wild-flowers ever blossom, amid fern and moss, with such luxuriance as in the dells and glades of Marholm Chase?—or the lark sing his morning song in such an ecstasy of intolerable joy as when he quivered upwards through the sunlit air from his nest in the daisied pastures that lay girdled by the great brown Marholm moors?

Those bare brown moors, whose rugged brows all the long winter through had darkened with a sullen frown, scarce relaxing even in the sweet spring-time. But now, what a tender bloom stole over them as, far and wide, myriads of bracken fronds uncurled themselves, until over the sunny heights and swelling slopes a veil of softest emerald everywhere was drawn.

That was a glorious June; one in a thousand. So even old Humphrey Blenkinsop declared, sitting in conclave with his fellow-patriarchs under the beech-tree on the green, and comparing it with the long-dead Junes whose roses he and they had plucked, wandering at twilight down the Marholm lanes, as the village lovers wandered now with their sweethearts by their side. A June full of all manner of pleasantness, and of promise too. There would be a splendid hay harvest, the farmers said—"a most uncommon heavy crop," though it would be a little later than usual this year on account of the spring having been somewhat backward. But no one grumbled at that, unless it might be the farmers themselves, who liked to have a good space clear between hay-time and harvest.

Otherwise Marholm in general was well-pleased to have it so, as giving time for the Feast to be held and comfortably over before the business of mowing commenced.

The great day of the Marholm year was this Feast-day, as good as a Midsummer Christmas Day for extra cheer and family gatherings. The lads and lasses out in service, even as far away as St. Bede's, were sure to have a holiday for Marholm Feast, and after midday no one even thought of keeping at work; everyone turned out, dressed in their Sunday best, to see what was doing on the green. Pleasure enough of all sorts was there, for old and young alike. Booths and stalls with toys and sweetmeats for the children; such plenitude of cakes and candy, such mountains of nuts and oranges; dolls for the little girls; whips, and balls, and tops, and jack-knives enough for a whole world of boys. And, for the village swains, what time in all the year was like this for choosing and making presents that might facilitate the course of true love, so apt to run anything but smoothly? What treasures there were to choose from! —collars and neck-ribbons; brooches, lockets, and

ear-rings that were to be distinguished from real gold only by the price. Hearts hard as the nether mill-stone might relent, if plied with presents such as these. And, truth to tell, many a rustic beauty, from time immemorial, had reckoned back to Marholm Feast as the day when, with responsive blushes, she had listened to the clumsy declaration which her bashful lover had needed the courage of his gifts to make.

And then for the elderly folk there were the neighbourly meetings; for, besides those who trudged in on foot to the Feast, numbers from distant villages came jogging in on sturdy-going nags, or in their own spring-carts. For the Marholm matrons there was the dear delight of unlimited gossip on the green, with hospitable attentions to be offered afterwards in the form of invitations to tea and cake at home. And for the men there were the news of the country side to be heard, and perhaps a little business to be transacted over a pipe and mug of ale in the sanded parlour of the "Danvers' Arms" or the "Chequers."

Besides all this, there were swings and merry-go-rounds for the youngsters, and shows ex-

hibited in gaily-painted caravans, even the outsides of which, to say nothing of the wonders within, were a sight to be seen. There were races, too; running in sacks, and donkey races, hopping races, and races backwards; and in the evening there was dancing on the green, old Tommy Donkin, the blind fiddler, being specially retained for the occasion. Even the "quality" themselves did not disdain to honour the Feast with their presence. Generally two or three carriages, at least, drove through Marholm in the afternoon, belonging to the gentlefolk from the neighbourhood, who came to look at what was going on, though they were never known to patronize the stalls or shows.

The Canon, and Miss Daylmer, and Miss Marjory were more condescending still, and went about quite affably among the merry-makers, with smiles and greetings, and kindly inquiries for all. To some, indeed, half the pleasure of the Feast would have been lost, if they had not had a word or a friendly nod from "his Reverence," or if they could not have gone home to tell how Miss Daylmer or Miss Marjory had stopped before all the folk to speak to them.

Harmless boasting, theirs. Surely one of the blessed things of life it is to have amongst us those whom the heart does truly reverence, some to whom loyal love can honestly be given. And the Marholm villagers were happy in this: that, from the old man tottering to the grave down to the latest toddler on the green, all loved the Canon, and looked up to him as one whose life was true in all things to the lessons which he taught—a friend in whose good-will they trusted as securely as in heaven itself.

It was, perhaps, a little hard on Mrs. Boynton that the exigencies of her position as landlady of the "Danvers' Arms" precluded her on these occasions from taking her full share in the festivities. No busier time in all the year there was for her than Marholm Feast. The dinners that were cooked and eaten on that day at the "Danvers' Arms," the comfortable glasses dispensed from the bar of her snug parlour, and the numbers of gigs, spring-carts, nags, and ponies that required accommodation on her premises, exceeded the whole custom of any ordinary fortnight. No wonder that, from

morning to night, she could seldom squeeze so much as half an hour from her numerous avocations, to don her Sunday shawl and bonnet, and step out, like the rest of her neighbours, to see what was going on.

She had her compensations, however, for even this enforced seclusion from the various gaieties on the green. The incessant stream of company pouring in the livelong day afforded opportunities for unlimited gossip at home; and as Mrs. Boynton was one of those notable dames who can not only use their tongue and their hands at the same time, but can keep eyes and ears open also to what others are about, she probably got as much enjoyment out of the Feast as any woman in the village, to say nothing of the store of silver that chinked at night in her till. Everyone who had anything to drive "put up" at the "Danvers' Arms," the entertainment offered at the "Chequers" being of quite an inferior description, and adapted chiefly for those whose requirements ranged no higher than pipes and beer. In her plum-coloured gown, fitting well over a somewhat

bountiful form, and pink cap-ribbons profusely flying, the buxom dame herself had doubtless no small share in attracting custom to her hostel. Indeed, it was well known that more than one substantial yeoman in the neighbourhood would not unwillingly constitute himself Luke Boynton's successor, were it not for the *chevaux de frise* of sharp-tipped speech which the good lady instantly erected round her when the most distant approach to matrimonial overtures was in any quarter indicated.

It was whispered, however, though only whispered, that the dame might not prove equally impregnable in every direction. The more venturesome of the village gossips had speculated *sub rosâ* on the chances which Giles Brown might have, were he to push his fortunes there. One thing everyone might see, that they pretty often happened to meet one another coming out of church, though whether the accident of meeting was due to Mrs. Boynton or the keeper, was matter of profound uncertainty. Nor were there any means of getting at the truth by the hints and innuendoes and knowing looks available in such cases generally.

For the dark-visaged keeper was not a man to be trifled with; Madge, too, was a girl whose temper was quickly up; and as for Mrs. Boynton, everyone knew it would be dangerous to put her upon her mettle.

It may be supposed, therefore, that the circumstance did not pass without remark when the landlady, who had popped out about five o'clock to take a look round, was seen to join the keeper and his daughter as they sat watching the throng from the bench that girdled the great beech-tree on the green. Madge had not been there long herself. Instead of coming down, as she had always done before, quite early in the afternoon, so as to have as much as possible of the Feast, she had waited at home for her father, and had come in with him. Marholm Feast this year seemed different to her somehow from any that had been before. The excitement had gone strangely out of it. The booths and stalls, the painted shows, and all the variegated bustle of the scene, were there; the rustic beaux, looking a little uncomfortable in their Sunday suits, the village belles, her ancient rivals, with blowsy faces and resplen-

dent ribbons, were laughing and talking with their respective admirers, all evidently bent on making the most of the occasion. But Madge was living now in a world quite apart from this—a world whose splendour paled into insignificance these commoner delights. It was with a sort of careless condescension that she looked about her as she came on the green with her father, who wondered a little that, instead of caring to make the round of the gaily-bedizened stalls, she chose rather to sit down quietly at once on the bench upon the green.

They had hardly been there a moment, when Mark Staniland came up, bringing with him a cabbage-leaf full of gigantic strawberries, which he gallantly pressed on Madge. Mark had been indulging previously in an incipient flirtation with little Nelly Mossop, a daughter of one of the neighbouring farmers, whom he had been escorting about the green for the last hour or more. He managed to drop her, however, when he caught sight of Madge, having a shrewd misgiving that his cause with the uncertain beauty would not be furthered by the appearance of a rival on the field.

Mark really was a fine-looking fellow. Madge could not help owning it to herself, as he stood talking to her there, while she shared with her father the cool delicious fruit, which their long walk and the warmth of the afternoon had made as acceptable as the giver could desire. Straight and tall, with his hair well brushed up, his flowered waistcoat, and a rose in his button-hole, he was, she thought, an extremely personable young man, and a beau that many a girl would be proud enough to possess. She was not averse herself to having him there beside her, evidently doing his best to make himself agreeable. But, as for coquetting with him, that was a thing of the past, an amusement that was no longer worth the trouble. The Marholm girls were welcome enough now to Mark's attentions. He was of no more consequence to her, from an ulterior point of view, than if he had been one of the pack of schoolboys who, with shouts of laughter, were being tossed up and down in the swing boat at the further end of the green.

Perhaps, if Mark had known the secret of her easy affability, he might have taken himself

away sooner than he did. As it was, he stood his ground, not a little elated by the readiness with which his attentions were permitted, until disturbed by the arrival of Mrs. Boynton. Madge dropped him then as coolly as Nelly Mossop had been dropped awhile ago by him, and, the strawberries being all consumed, she gave him the empty cabbage-leaf to carry away.

Mrs. Boynton was lively as usual in conversation.

"It has been as much as ever I could do to get away for ten minutes," she declared, as she plumped her capacious person upon the bench beside Madge. "Right on end have I been at it, from five o'clock this morning till this blessed minute; and the day's work not done yet by five good hours or more. There's an uncommon sight of company in Marholm this Feast, and more shows and things than ever I recklect of before. They do say them waxworks beats everything. But you'll have seen them, Madge, I reckon. Some one has been and took you in, so many beaux as there is about."

"Indeed they haven't, Mrs. Boynton," return-

ed Madge, with an air of indifference. "We have only just got here, father and me. We stopped and had our teas before we started."

"Then I don't see as we could do better than all of us go in together," said Mrs. Boynton, briskly; "and I'll stand treat myself. They are something quite out of the common way, by what folks say; as natural as life, and the beautifullest dresses. There's Queen Victoria in her coronation robes, and the Princess of Wales, all in white tulle and spangles, and the Lord Mayor of London, and Rob Roy, and lots besides. It would be a pity to miss it. What do you say, Mr. Brown?" she added, turning on the keeper a glance of confident appeal.

"I'm agreeable," said Giles, looking a little doubtfully to his daughter, "if our Madge here has a mind to it."

But Madge had pricked her ears at the mention of the dresses, and needed no persuasion now.

A splendid sight was that waxwork show, like a gorgeous dream to the unsophisticated

eyes of Marholm rusticity. Fierce brigands, in the most striking and chromatic costumes, side by side with ladies of resplendent charms; kings and queens, highwaymen and cavaliers, Lord Nelson and the Queen of Sheba; all of them, according to the showman, authentic likenesses, and the dresses unrivalled for magnificence by any similar establishment. Mrs. Boynton was loud in her exclamations. Madge was fairly awed by the imposing spectacle, though she was conscious, too, of a dim feeling of compassion as she gazed at some of the more conspicuous among the waxen beauties standing there in such superb array and moving everyone to admiration. It seemed almost a pity they should not know how beautiful they were. For Madge had her own experience on the subject now, which she brought to bear upon the silent company around her. No moment in her life seemed to her in the retrospect so full of ecstasy as that when she had turned her delighted gaze upon her own figure in the mirror at the Priory House, after Mrs. Mapperly had dressed her in Madam's black velvet and Venetian point.

She felt her bosom throb afresh as she recalled

it. Certainly, she thought, even some of these waxen ladies were not more beautiful than she had been herself that afternoon; and unconsciously she drew herself up, and moved with a more stately gait. That had been only the trying on of her dignity. When it was her very own, as it would be if ever she was lady of the Priory House, how she would queen it then before an admiring world!

Each batch of spectators was allowed a quarter of an hour only in the show; but even that consumed a large portion of the scanty furlough which Mrs. Boynton felt able to allow herself.

"I had ought to be going home again now," she said, as they came down the steps of the caravan, "or, I'll be bound for it, there'll be something gone wrong when I get back. There's no trusting girls a minute when your back is turned; or else it does seem a shame not to have just a look at the stalls and things."

"Never heed the girls," said Giles, breaking gruffly into speech. As Mrs. Boynton had "stood treat" for the "Waxworks," he felt himself bound in honour to be equally liberal in

return. "They'll do well enough, I'll warrant, for another ten minutes; and we can just take a turn round the green, and see what's doing."

The landlady acceded, nothing loath; and Giles, relapsing into silence, made a way through the throng of starers who were crowded in front of the caravan, and convoyed his charge across the green.

CHAPTER XIX.

POOR RALPH!

THEY were stopped about half way over by no less a personage than Mr. Beverley himself.

"Well, to be sure, Mr. Beverley, sir!" cried the landlady, with a smile and curtsey. "Who would have thought of seeing you here?"

"I have come, like the rest of the world, Mrs. Boynton, to see what is going on;" said Hugh, who had included the whole party in a cordial salute, which the keeper returned by a grip of the fur cap he wore, and Madge with a most becoming blush, as she dropped her eyes and instinctively made a curtsey too.

Her father had several times fallen in with their late guest as he was passing through the

Chase, and once Mr. Beverley had been to their cottage when, unluckily, she had chanced herself to be away. She had seen him at church of course, but this was the first time that he had crossed her path since the evening when she had prepared supper for him, on his way to Marholm, the night of his arrival. Madge did not forget the impression that her good looks had evidently made upon their guest, nor how he had shaken hands with her, and even lifted his hat, quite as if she were a lady, when he took his leave. It all flashed into her remembrance now, and roused the coquettish consciousness which had remained passive under Mark Staniland's attentions.

"I just wanted to tell you, Mrs. Boynton," said Hugh, "that I shall not be in to dinner. I am going to the rectory, so you need not prepare anything for me. I daresay you have enough on your hands to-day in other ways."

"Indeed, sir, you may well say we are throng," returned the landlady, with another curtsey. "And I am greatly obliged to you for letting me know about the dinner. I had only just stepped out for a minute to take a

look round," she added, as if mindful that her presence on the green at such a time might be supposed to require an apology.

"To be sure, Mrs. Boynton, to be sure! Don't let me keep you," said Hugh. But, instead of moving away, he turned and actually walked with them towards the booths; to the intense satisfaction of the landlady, who was quite alive to the importance which this recognition by the "quality" conferred upon her in the eyes of the Marholm world.

Madge, too, felt an unwonted sense of exultation when Mr. Beverley, turning aside a little from the others, addressed himself with equal affability to her father and herself. It was a new sensation altogether to be talking to a gentleman like Mr. Beverley, with all Marholm there to see. Talking to him, too, as easily as if he had been an old acquaintance of their own. For Hugh had a way of putting people at ease with him from the first; though, through all the air of *camaraderie* that marked his manners, a certain inward dignity disclosed itself which made it difficult for anyone to pass the boundary between ease and familiarity. Madge

was quite sensible of the difference between Mr. Beverley and Mr. Pelham Elphinstone; for, though he was treating her as politely as if she had been "quality" like himself, she somehow found it impossible to play off her little coquetries, and to air her graces for his benefit, as she could have done had it been the young Squire who was walking and talking with them.

It was supremely pleasant, however, to be thus distinguished. Madge carried her handsome head more proudly than before; her colour rose, and she trod the turf like some young princess at a pageant. Nor was it a mere passing triumph either, for when they reached the great centre booth, where all manner of tempting wares were displayed for sale, Mr. Beverley, after a moment's search, chose out a beautiful pressed-glass bowl for holding flowers, which he begged her to accept. By way of return, he said, for the excellent supper she had been good enough to give him awhile ago.

The keeper's black brows relaxed as he saw the pleasure that flashed from his daughter's face.

"You've setten her up now, sir," he said, with one of his grim smiles, as Hugh put the bowl into her hands. While Madge, surprised for the moment into forgetfulness of everything except the gift itself, raised such glowing eyes to the giver that further thanks, even if she could have given them utterance at once, would have been superfluous.

Hugh did not wait for them. Thanks were his special aversion; and, having discharged his little debt of honour, he moved away, just lifting his hat to Madge as he went. He did it instinctively, as he had done before when he parted from his young hostess at the cottage door. It was the man's involuntary tribute to the beauty of the girl, and to that careless queenliness which seemed in Madge to claim such homage as a natural due.

"My goodness gracious!" ejaculated the landlady, "you may well say she is set up, Mr. Brown. Why, he couldn't have shown more manners if it had been Miss Marjory herself. But I never did see the like of you, Madge, for making folk feel as if the best of everything was yours by right."

"There's no one has a better right, anyhow," said the keeper, eyeing his daughter proudly. "But come, Mrs. Boynton, you shan't need to be jealous. I'll make you a present myself of a bowl like hers. Here, master, reach us down the fellow to this here bowl."

The man at the stall obeyed with alacrity, glancing slily askance at the buxom dame, who betrayed, however, no signs of embarrassment, but with high-handed ease accepted the gift, declaring that she would put it to use that very day. Her colour at all times was rather high, and, if on the present occasion it was a little more so than usual, the fact might fairly be set down to the warmth of the afternoon and the extra exertions which she had been called upon to make.

It was a pity Mrs. Boynton could not have stayed a little longer to enjoy the company of her friends, for she had hardly said good-bye to them, and was still bearing full sail across the green, carrying her trophy with her, when no less a personage than Miss Daylmer herself, and her niece Marjory with her, came up and accosted Madge. She had been wanting to see

her, she said, to ask if she would kindly do a little service for them. They were talking of having a picnic in the Chase some afternoon next week. Would Madge boil them a kettle of water for their tea?

"We have always had a gipsy fire before," explained Marjory, "but there has been so much said lately about the danger of lighting fires in the wood, that we do not like to set the example of doing it ourselves."

Madge made the promise with unlimited satisfaction. There was a genuine goodwill about her which enjoyed the opportunity of doing a kindness to anyone; but to be asked to oblige Miss Daylmer touched her self-importance, too. And then the request was made so graciously, quite as if it were a favour they were asking from some one like themselves. Indeed, Miss Marjory, she was sure, could not have spoken more pleasantly even to the quality.

"Every inch a lady," Madge thought, as she stood beside her now, and drew a quick comparison between herself and this high-bred girl, with her delicate dress and clear-cut features, and voice that rang like a silver bell. It was

Miss Marjory that Mrs. Boynton had said was a likely young lady for Mr. Pelham to marry. And for a moment Madge could not quell the sense of dull discomfort that oppressed her, as she felt how much the young Squire's cousin had the advantage of her in that nameless charm which rank and breeding can bestow. Just for a moment, and then the tide of returning confidence flowed back. There was not so very much, she thought, after all, to be afraid of in Miss Marjory's quiet face. It was not half so handsome, Madge considered, as her own; and that little grey velvet hat, though it had cost ever so much, no doubt, was not nearly so becoming, she was sure, as her own coarse straw, with the knot of crimson ribbons that sat so well against her dark hair. If Mr. Pelham were there just now, Madge thought she knew which of them he would admire the most.

But nothing of all this told itself as she stood before the parsonage ladies, proud to be seen talking to them, prouder still in the secret confidence that her own fine face, and her coquettish airs, would be more likely by far to fascinate

the young Squire than any beauty of the sort which Miss Marjory, quality though she might be, could boast of. She was just, to them, the Madge Brown who had the finest voice in all the village choir, and who had been Miss Millicent's best scholar in the Sunday school not so very long ago. A handsome, wilful girl, rather too conscious, perhaps, of her good looks, and not quite guiltless of flirtations with the Marholm beaux; but a good girl on the whole, who would settle down by-and-by, no doubt, into a capital wife, and make some honest fellow's home as comfortable as she made her father's now.

And yet there was a subtle change upon her, the outcome of those ambitious dreams, making itself already distinctly felt. She had been living of late in another world than formerly, and her manners, her expression, the very accent of her voice were catching the tone of that invisible companionship. Miss Millicent could not help remarking upon it afterwards to her brother, who had come out as well as herself, and was moving about among the people, taking the opportunity of shaking hands and having a

word with as many of his more distant parishioners as possible.

"What a fine young woman Madge Brown has grown into," she said, as they stood together for a moment watching the frolics on the green. "And her manners, too, are so superior, not at all what you would look for in her position in life."

"One might almost fancy she had been changed in her cradle," said Marjory. "The cottage baby taken away, and some little princess put in its place."

The Canon turned his eyes to where Madge, at a little distance, was walking by her father's side. She had put her hand within the keeper's arm, and was talking to him as they went. They seemed proud of one another, proud and fond; the man in his dark, rough strength, the girl, like some bright exotic, in her rich, warm bloom.

"There is something very distinctive about her, certainly," said the Canon; "a sort of gipsy queenliness not common in a cottage-bred girl." But there was a shade of gravity in his voice as he spoke. He had caught what his

sister had missed, the half defiant beauty of the girl, as well as her lessening rusticity; a hint of that hidden restlessness which was chafing even now against the bars of circumstance, and giving that air of resistant pride which nevertheless sat so well upon her. Nature, in her very kindliness, gives dangerous gifts sometimes. It might be, the good pastor thought doubtfully to himself, that she had dowered this seeming favourite amiss. And Madge had no mother either to watch over her. "We must look after her a little," he added, presently, "and not let her feel that she is less cared for than she used to be, now that she has slipped out of childhood into womanhood. She is just at an age when girls most need some wise guidance over them, and her father, I suspect, lets her rule herself entirely, and yields to her in everything."

"She does not look as if it would be easy for anyone else to rule her," said Marjory. "But how proud her father seems of her. I do believe he cares as much to have people admire her as she does herself."

"There is Ralph Burton going up to them,"

said Miss Millicent, a sudden smile mantling over her comfortable face. Miss Millicent was the *confidante* of half the parish, and good Mrs. Burton, not long ago, had entrusted to her the secret of her son's desire to win Madge Brown for his wife. "He is giving her a fairing, too. I have seen him carrying that dainty little basket about with him all the afternoon. I thought it must be meant for her. I wish the young gipsy would make up her mind to have him, instead of playing with his love like a cat with a mouse. Poor Ralph! he has not much to say for himself, but I believe he worships the very ground she treads on. To see him in church, listening to her voice in the choir, you might think he heard an angel singing!"

"Aunt Millicent!" laughed Marjory, "I declare you are talking poetry. But perhaps she does love him a little, really; only she won't let him find it out until he asks her. See, she has taken his basket, and is lifting the moss from what is inside it; and now she is smiling quite kindly upon him. The course of true love may be running smoothly, after all."

Miss Millicent shook her head somewhat

doubtfully still; but when, an hour or so afterwards, she saw them all, apparently going home together, Ralph with his arms full of Madge's parcels, and Madge herself, with downdropped eyes, walking quietly beside him, she began to hope that the Moor Farm might be in a fair way for having its new mistress, after all.

If she could have seen Ralph, as he climbed the moorland path on his way home again that evening, the red sunset light falling on a face from which all brightness of its own had died away, she would have come to a different conclusion. Madge, meaning no mischief—nay, wishing rather to avoid it, had lured him to his fate with those too kindly smiles. He had staked his all, and lost it too!

CHAPTER XX.

THE NEW LOVE AND THE OLD.

MADGE had visitings of compunction afterwards. The next few days were not spent altogether in inward ease. She was vexed beyond measure with Ralph for having blundered out his tale of unwelcome love. Just as if she could have helped taking his fairing pleasantly, with her father standing by to see how she behaved to him! Was he to go home with them and ask her to marry him on the strength of it? And yet she could not help being vexed with herself as well, for having been so sharp and scornful with him. She had seen the wretchedness in his face as she flouted him with her careless words, the look of pain, like that in the eyes of some dumb animal, as

he turned away, wounded by the hand he loved; and conscience whispered that, even for his love, she was not altogether guiltless.

Madge knew full well that the young man's passion had been fed sometimes with smiles and glances, which had been to it like fuel to the flame. She knew the time had been, and that not so very long ago, when Ralph might have been well excused for thinking that she meant him, sooner or later, to succeed. She had coquetted with her other lovers, and had liked it to be known that she had so many of them; but, with all her faults, Madge was maidenly and true womanly at the heart of her, and she remembered now, with blushes and remorse, some tender passages which she had not meant once should be the last.

Poor Ralph! She might have sent him away a little more kindly. She wished she had. But she wished still more that she could have done it without her father's knowledge. Everything at home had been so uncomfortable since. Not that her father was angry with her, or even out of temper, but he was moody and disappointed, and when he sat down of an evening with his

pipe, had never a word to say, but would just turn himself to the fire, and smoke on for an hour together without once looking up. It was his way to be quiet, when things went wrong with him; but Madge knew what he was brooding over, as he sat with his black brows bent, and his eyes looking out with that dull light in them from under their dark pent-house. It made her feel uncomfortable, out of tune with herself and everything about her, and Madge hated to be uncomfortable; above all things, she hated to feel any jar between her father and herself. It seemed to turn all the sunshine of her life into east wind and cloud, to prick her with a sense of perpetual reproach; and the worst of it was that there was no possibility of coaxing him right again, except by owning herself in the wrong, and that was the last thing that Madge was disposed to do.

Her only escape was into the world of dreams which she had created round her, and in that she lived, all the more intensely, perhaps, because the real one just now was so unsatisfactory and perverse.

That delightful dream-world! There, at all

events, things could be made to happen exactly to her mind; there, the goal of her ambition could be reached at once; there, the wrong lover kept out of the way, and the right one came precisely as he ought. There, she heard herself wooed with honeyed speech, such as had dropped already from the young Squire's lips. There, she listened enchanted to the clang of wedding bells, and saw the flower-wreathed arches up the churchyard path, and the Marholm folk looking on at the bridal state and splendour, and the Priory House decorated for its new mistress, and Mr. Pelham proud as proud could be of the handsome young wife whom everyone, even the quality themselves, were admiring and envying for her dress and beauty and high good-fortune.

How she would queen it then! How grandly she would sweep along, with her velvet train behind her, and her beautiful round arms and creamy neck and shoulders bare, carrying herself, too, like the lady that she was! It was rather misty beyond that. What the great world really was, or what there would be for her to do, further than to dress and be admired,

Madge was not quite clear. But there was enough up to that point to keep her fancy well at work. All day long, as she went to and fro about her household tasks, her busier brain was weaving its romance—if that could be called romance which to her was all solid, sober reality, no mere day-dream of pleasant things that might be, but the rehearsal in her own mind of what was really by-and-by to make up the substance of her own actual life.

If Mr. Pelham admired her so much as she was sure he did, he must begin soon to love her too. And if he loved her, then what was to prevent his doing as his father had done before him, and marrying the handsomest wife that he could get? The steps were so few, so simple, and every time she thought about them they seemed more certain too. No logician of the schools could be more assured of the connection between premises and conclusion than was Madge that, present circumstances given, her own promotion to be lady of the Priory House must be the inevitable result. If only it were not so long to the young Squire's return! It was the first week in July now, nearly two

months before he would be home again, and that was such a tedious time to wait.

But Mr. Pelham Elphinstone came down before then. He, too, had been dreaming his dreams and laying his plans. For across the dull background of that cousinly wooing which was to follow these weeks of stupid barrister life, there had been passing, more persistently than he could have imagined possible, the vision of a handsome gipsy head, and a pair of dark eyes, full of fire and softness, glancing bewitchingly askance. It would be worth some trouble, the young man thought, to have a good look into the depths of those dark eyes, and worth more still to persuade them to look back into his in return. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to him an absolute necessity that he should make the attempt, and the more impossible it seemed that he should put off doing so until his return in September. Besides, who could tell what might happen in the meantime, with those bumpkin lovers hanging round? The chances were that one or other of them would be setting up as a future husband for her, and when a girl once got the

notion of marrying in her head, there was precious little room for anything else until that was past.

Mr. Pelham found his logic, on the whole, as convincing as Madge had discovered hers to be; sufficiently so to take him down to Marholm on the strength of it. The Squire had a bad attack of gout just then, an unusually bad one, which his son and heir decided would make a decent excuse for running down to see how he was getting on. Not that he cared much to face his father under those conditions, but, of course, he must have some hinge of a reason for showing himself at home before the end of his three months' probation had arrived. Then, naturally, with the pointer pup to inquire after, he would be at no loss for an errand to Giles Brown's cottage. Things could not have arranged themselves more to the purpose, Mr. Pelham thought, as he put a ten-pound note into his pocket, and took the early mail to Stretton, where he had written overnight to Summers, the Priory groom, to meet him with a horse and trap.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

BOUND
BY
LEIGHTON
SON AND
HODGE

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